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THE BBC TV SERIES...

WHEN THE BOAT COMES IN

James Mitchell

author of the CALLAN series

James Mitchell was born in South Shields, County Durham, in 1926 and educated at King's College, Newcastle, and St. Edmunds Hall, Oxford. He has had a number of jobs, including shipyard worker, actor, teacher, journalist and travel courier. Under the pseudonym of James Munro he has written four highly successful thrillers, one of which, *The Innocent Bystander*, has been filmed. His other novels include *Red File for Callan* - in which Callan first appeared before the reading public - *Russian Roulette* and *Smear Job*.

When the Boat Comes In

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Set in Baskerville

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To Major and Mrs. K. J. McCoy

A Land fit for Heroes and Idiots

1

There was nothing to do because the pubs were shut. It would have been different if he had had a wife or parents, or a few relatives even, but the Spanish flu had got his last surviving cousin three months before. He took himself off for a walk. The town hadn't changed: there were times when he doubted whether it ever could change: same grimy streets, grit crunching underfoot, cobbles that even after four years made his army boots slither. And to look at—smoke-blackened houses which benighted women struggled to keep clean, pit heaps and winding engines. To listen to, screams of seagulls that sounded outraged at being obliged to live in a town as hopeless as Gallowshield, and the rattle of rivet hammers from the shipyards. When he heard the rivet hammers he knew there was work about, and once his discharge leave was over he would have to go and find some of that work for himself. And make a change that would after four years of soldiering. It was daft, it was downright insane, not wanting to go back to the shipyard, but he didn't.

He thought of going down to the sea, to watch the big ships coming and going, but there was no future in that. To watch the big ships was to think of escape, and there was no escaping Gallowshield. He slogged on aimlessly, came at last to a cinema and looked at the bills outside. Our Heroes of France they said, plus Charlie Chaplin. Anyway he thought, that just about sums it up. Heroes plus Charlies Ford paid his money and went in to the remembered smell of clothes and sweat, Woodbines and sweets. He sat alone: it would be awful, but it would only be until the pubs opened up again

and he could go looking for a mate; Matt Hedley—or Paddy Boyle.

A couple of seats away three people sat together—a man between two girls, and if neither girl was a filmstar, neither was all that ugly either. He looked at the screen. The pianist was thumping out patriotic tunes as the battle picture laboriously evolved. It was no more France than he was Marshal Foch. Bloody big field in the Home Counties he supposed and fellers leaping in and out of trenches with a kind of reckless abandon that would have got them all shot in two minutes. If they had really gone on like that the war would have been over in a week—the Germans would have nobody left to kill. And with the battle pictures the captions: 'Our brave boys', 'A taste of cold steel', and then 'When the Germans surrendered' as they inevitably did, cowardly rats that they were, 'Our victorious Tommies'. He had fought the Germans for four years, and they were no more cowardly rats than he was. Almost he began to feel indignation on their behalf, but then he remembered a taste of cold steel and Jesus that was funny A line of men in rigid formation, all moved forward at the double and cheered at the same time instead of saving their breath, not one who cringed, not one who looked afraid, not one who got shot in two, so that he began to laugh: he could not help it.

Of the three people two seats away one girl and the man were too engrossed in each other to bother much about the screen, but the other girl sat enthralled It was too much. Ford found himself laughing so hard that he choked on the Gold Flake he'd just lit. At last, 'The End' appeared to the tune of Land of Hope and Glory and the lights went up. The girl who had stared at the screen so avidly turned to him in a fury.

'There must be something wrong with your eyesight,' she said. 'Charlie Chaplin isn't on till later.'

'There's nothing wrong with my eyes,' said Ford.

'You thought that was funny?' said the girl.

The other girl leaned across to her, worried.

'Now, Jessie—' she began, but Ford interrupted.

'I wouldn't say it was exactly funny, no,' he said. 'You look like an educated woman, Jessie. Maybe you could tell me the word I'm looking for.'

This time it was the man's turn to lean across.

'Watch your mouth, mister,' he said. 'That's my sister you're talking to.'

'Oh aye,' said Ford. 'Got a bit of a temper, hasn't she?'

The man began to get out of his seat. 'Now look here,' he began, but his sister interrupted him.

'Take no notice of him,' she said. 'He's been drinking.'

'It beats tasting cold steel, Jessie,' said Ford. 'Every time.'

Then the lights went down again for the Charlie Chaplin picture. An old one—it would have to be—'The Cure'. He'd seen it a dozen times. For some reason it was the one they always showed when the battalion was resting behind the lines. Comforts for the troops. In his mind he mimicked an officer's lady's voice—take their minds off that terrible war. And the troops had obliged by laughing. Every time. When you thought of what they'd left, were returning to, there was little wonder. Compared with such things a man whose only problems were hiding whisky and tripping over a gouty foot were pure delight. They laughed until they wept, the poor sods, till their sides ached, as Jessie and her brother and his girl were laughing now, but Ford found he couldn't laugh: not any more. He moved instead to sit beside the girl called Jessie.

'That word I couldn't think of,' he said, 'it was ironic.'

It was too dark to see, but he was sure she smiled.

The Chaplin film ended and the man went off with his two girls. On impulse Jack Ford got up and followed them. The one called Jessie had a quality about her that he couldn't define, perhaps didn't even want to, but it was there. A responsible, educated girl, not one you could pick up at the pictures, but after she had left there was no reason for him to stay—and anyway the pubs were open. The three of them went into

'The Fleece' which surprised him: Jessie hadn't looked like one for pubs. He went in after them.

*

Tom Seaton wasn't one for going into the snug much: the public bar, that was more his style, with a few mates you could talk to about football, or whippets, or pitch and toss, or the hell of earning your living down a mine. But he had managed to get Jessie talked into coming into the snug, and that was victory enough for one day. He looked about him while they waited for their drinks; coal fire burning in the grate, and for decoration advertisements for cigarettes and booze. Not even a picture of a pretty girl, not even a view. They might as well have been back in chapel except that the drinks came, a pint for himself and a couple of halves of shandy for Mary and Jessie. Jessie peered suspiciously at hers as if after one swallow she'd collapse and wake up a white slave in South America.

'We shouldn't be here,' she said. 'I know we shouldn't.'

'Oh come on, Jessie. Don't start being a schoolteacher here,' said her brother.

Mary said, 'There's no harm in a shandy, pet. Our family never looked at drink, but they didn't mind a shandy.' But Jessie was not one for giving in that easily. Never change, thought Tom.

'If our dad ever knew—' said Jessie.

'But he does know,' said Tom. 'Do you think I'd bring you here without asking him?'

Reluctantly Jessie said, 'Well—I suppose there's no harm in one.'

She and Mary sipped their shandies and Tom took a pull at his pint. As they did so the barman appeared again and put a glass of port before each girl, a whisky in front of Tom. If shandy were a drug to Jessie, port, it seemed, was sheer poison.

'What's that?' she said.

Baffled, the barman said, 'Two ports and a whisky.'

'We never ordered it,' said Jessie.

'No,' said the barman. 'He did.'

He pointed to the door. Jack Ford stood in the doorway not quite posed, but well aware of his charm, thought Jessie. He lifted a whisky glass in salute. He was a handsome one, all right, his sergeant's uniform cut as elegantly as an officer's.

'Good health,' he said.

'We don't want this,' said Jessie.

Haughty as a countess, thought Ford, and yet with a simplicity like the lady's maid he'd lived with in Murmansk. What was her name—Maria? Christina? Plumper than this one, whatever her name had been, but all the same he was glad he had followed them and bought the drinks. He looked at her brother who was eyeing the whisky.

'We don't *want* this,' said Jessie again.

'You speak for yourself, Jessie,' said Ford, and walked over to their table.

'Stop calling me Jessie.'

'By rights you should ask me to sit down,' said Ford and sat.

An elegance like a gentleman's, she thought, something he had learned. By watching. He'd be good at watching.

'You've got a lot to learn if you're going to start sitting in pubs,' said Ford.

'Now look here—' her brother said.

'You said that before,' said Ford.

Tom looked bewildered. 'You've got to stop bothering my sister,' he said, but it came out a lot weaker than he had intended.

Ford turned to Jessie. 'Am I bothering you?' he asked.

Jessie replied unhesitatingly, 'Yes, you are.'

'Because I laughed at our brave Tommies?'

'Partly,' she said.

Ford said, 'I'd never laugh at *them*, Jessie. I was one meself.'

Jessie said, 'You followed us here.'

'Well I had to, didn't I?' said Ford.

'Had to?'

'We haven't finished our conversation,' said Ford. 'Drink your nice port.'

'I said one drink and no more,' said Jessie.

'No, Jessie,' said Ford, 'you said one shandy. That's port.'

He lifted his whisky glass again. 'Cheers.'

Slowly, reluctantly Jessie sipped at her port and immediately Tom grabbed for his whisky. You'd think the poor bugger had to have permission, thought Ford, and maybe he does. His girlfriend sipped at her port and smiled her thanks.

'By, that's good whisky,' said the brother and Ford thought: nice lad. Pitman by the build on him. But nothing and nobody. His sister could eat him for breakfast. Aloud he said, 'Thanks. How's the port?'

'Very nice,' said the other girl, 'thank you.'

'It's good port,' said Jessie. 'All right. But all the same—'

'Like I said,' said Ford, 'you've still got a lot to learn about pubs, Jessie. This is where we're supposed to introduce ourselves.' He rose. 'My name is Ford. Jack Ford.'

At once the brother rose too and shook hands.

'Tom Seaton,' he said. 'This is my fiancée, Miss Routledge, and this is my sister, Miss Seaton.'

Jack turned first to the fiancée. 'How do you do?' he said Then he turned and looked at Tom Seaton's sister, 'Jessie Seaton,' he said softly.

Jessie bridled at once. There was nothing wrong with the words exactly, it was just the way he'd said them, as if Jessie Seaton were a creature of infinite promise. But how could you rebuke him about a thing like that in a pub? He turned back to Tom Seaton's fiancée.

'Did you have a brother, Miss Routledge?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'I did. He was killed.'

She was a pretty girl, he thought, with a fragile prettiness that looked as if it lacked stamina. She looked nervous too. One mention of her brother, and she looked more than ner-

vous, she looked afraid. He'd seen enough fear in Murmansk to sniff it out wherever it was.

'His name was Joe, wasn't it?' he asked, and the girl nodded. 'Third Wipers July 31st 1917 ... That feller Haig has a lot to answer for. They all do.'

Tom Seaton said, 'You knew Mary's brother, did you?'

'Now, pet,' said Mary.

Tom Seaton looked as if he didn't want to leave it at that. So you've heard have you, Ford thought. But Jack Ford was used to conducting interrogations, not undergoing them.

'Aye,' he said. 'He was in my company. I wrote out the chop li—the casualty report.' He drank his whisky. 'Just a bairn, wasn't he?'

'Eighteen,' Mary Routledge said.

'He did all right, Mary,' said Ford.

'Thank you,' she said, but Tom Seaton still didn't look as if he wanted to leave it at that: but he had to. Ford suddenly found himself attacked on his other flank.

'I still don't see why you had to laugh,' said Jessie.

'Don't you?' said Ford, 'and you so clever.'

'Unless it was because the picture was dishonest?—And—how do you know I'm clever?'

'Tom here says you're a schoolteacher—and anyway you've just proved it.' She looked as bewildered as her brother had done, although on her it looked better.

'Proved I'm a schoolteacher?' she asked.

'Proved you're clever,' said Ford. 'The picture was dishonest. Now how was it dishonest?'

She said slowly, thinking out each phrase, 'It wasn't all bravery—and victorious Tommies—and cold steel?'

'Go to the top of the class, Jessie Seaton,' said Ford.

Tom looked around him restlessly and finished off his whisky. 'Jessie,' he said, 'I think we should be getting back.'

'In a minute,' she said, and Ford grinned to himself. She was a schoolteacher all right, and one who knew how to maintain discipline.

'Well maybe it wasn't all victorious Tommies, all the same—'

'Go on.'

'There's a lot of women like Mary in this town. They've lost brothers, husbands, fathers, sons. They've got a right to a bit of comfort, Jack Ford, and you've got no right to laugh at that.'

'Not even if the laughter is ironic?' said Ford.

'Not even then.'

Tom gathered his courage together and stood. 'Jessie,' he said, 'we said we'd be back for nine.'

'All right,' she said, and Tom sighed his relief, and then she turned to Ford. 'Finish your drink.'

'Pardon?' said Ford.

'We're late as it is,' she said, 'since you've made up your mind you're one of the family you might as well be on time for supper.'

Aye, he thought, there was fire in this one all right, but maybe there was warmth too.

2

They walked out, two and two, into the chill of the night air, Mary and Tom very close together, while Jessie kept her distance. That suited him fine. She would always be one for keeping her distance until she was really sure. From in front he could overhear snatches of Mary's and Tom's conversation as they walked. 'Yes, pet.' 'No, pet.' Perhaps the strongest term of endearment they knew although Tyneside was rich in endearing words—'pet, hinny, bonnie lass'—but endearment meant commitment and commitment in the end inevitably meant family. I've got to watch myself, thought Ford, but all the same he walked alongside Jessie Seaton, adjusting his pace to hers, and keeping his distance. More cobbled streets to slither on, more grit crunching underfoot, more billboards, more distant views of a pit wheel, the gaunt outlines of a ship half completed on the stocks. He was home all right even if he did have a girl to walk out with.

Suddenly Jessie said, 'Our Tom was in the army an'all.'

'Oh aye?'

'Same regiment as you,' she said

'What battalion?' he asked.

There was the barest perceptible hesitation.

'Ninth,' she said at last.

Nothing and nobody. A Ninth battalion man. Still, Tom had been lucky at that.

'That's right,' she said. 'He never went to France. And I'm glad.'

'There's a lot would envy him,' said Ford.

But the subject seemed to pain her: she turned at once to

something else and asked, 'You really knew Mary's brother?'

'I did.'

'And did he really do well?'

'Well enough,' said Ford, 'for a lad of 18 with both legs blown off.'

She stopped dead then and turned to face him. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh my God.'

Ford said, 'You must learn not to ask, Jessie Seaton. You'll always get the right answer. It would take a better man than me to tell you lies.'

She moved on again in silence till they passed a hoarding: a portrait of Lloyd George; the caption on which read '*Vote Liberal. Vote Pinner*'. Jack Ford looked at it, and remembered. The sitting member had died—drowned himself in too much port—now they were in the middle of a by-election.

Jessie Seaton said, 'Are you going to?'

'Vote?' said Ford. 'Me? Would you?'

Jessie said, 'Just give me the chance.'

'Fancy him, do you?' said Ford.

'That fat fool Pinner?' said Jessie. 'No fear.'

They moved on up the road and passed another poster. It read: '*The Liberals have promised you a land fit for heroes*'. Beneath it another hand had added in red '*and idiots*'.

Jessie looked scornfully away. Anything, Ford gathered, was better than a display of interest in the Liberal candidate. Then suddenly her gaze intensified Across the street a man was walking in a way she had never seen before: disorientated, lacking in co-ordination, and yet somehow with a military look about him as if he were carrying an invisible rifle. She turned to Ford.

'Do you see that?' she said, and as she spoke a motor-bike came from a side lane, its exhaust giving off a rattle like the burst from a machine gun. Instantly the disorientated man dropped flat.

'Oh look,' she said and moved to go to where the man lay in the gutter, prone, twitching. He had somehow conveyed the

impression that he faced an enemy, an armed and terrible enemy.

Jessie moved at once to go to the man lying in the road, but Ford put out his hand to prevent her. Angrily she tried to drag free, but his grip was too hard.

'Let me go,' she said.

'Leave him, Jessie,' said Ford.

'But he's having a fit,' she said.

'No,' said Ford. 'You watch a minute.'

Warily the man on the ground looked about him and then got up and moved on, still disorientated, still with something soldierly in his movements as if he was carrying an invisible rifle.

'What is it?' Jessie asked.

Ford said, 'Haven't you ever heard of shell-shock, Jessie Seaton?' They walked on, once more in silence, until they passed an off-licence and Ford said, 'What number do you live?'

'Thirty-seven,' she said.

'You'd better go on ahead and warn your mam and dad I'm coming,' said Ford. 'I don't want to be too much of a shock to them.'

She looked at him warily, then said, 'What have you started being nice for?'

'I wonder.'

She walked off then and left him. Already she knew that he would do exactly as he wanted to do: no more and no less, and to argue with him was to waste her time.

•

When she arrived home she found that she was involved in a family row almost as she crossed the threshold from the back door into the kitchen. Just to make Jack Ford feel at home she thought to herself. The trouble for her was that so far as the row went she was in the wrong, and knew that it was so. The trouble for her father was that he hadn't yet met

Jack Ford; that was a treat still to come. Her father was a pitman and puritan. It was true that he liked his pint, she thought, but only in moderation: in every other aspect of morality he was strict to the point of rigidity. Not so her mother. The only possible word to describe her mother was one she learned at college: a hedonist, that was Bella Seaton: pleasure her only principle, but with her mother pleasure took many forms: a drop to drink, a sing-song, bread rising just as it should, a laughing child, or her children getting on. All the same even her mother was shocked to hear that she had been seen talking with a soldier. Her father put it more directly.

'You let him pick you up,' Bill Seaton said.

'I didn't.' Jessie's voice was indignant.

'And what was our Tom thinking of walking on and leaving you two by yourselves like that?' her father asked.

Jessie said, 'He's courting, dad.'

Her father, single-minded to the last, said, 'I should never have let you go into that pub.'

Jessie said, 'Dad, if you'll just listen.'

Her father interrupted. 'You're supposed to be a grown woman—two years at college—looking after other folk's bairns—and you've started running after soldiers at your time of life.'

Jessie said, 'I'm not exactly middle-aged.'

'No,' said her father. 'By God you're not. And that makes it worse. I ought to take my belt to you.'

Mary moved closer to Tom; herself not quarrelsome, she could yet see how alike father and daughter were in their anger.

'All we did was talk,' said Jessie.

'That's all anybody does the first time,' her father said and turned on his son. 'And you stood there and let him.'

Mary could feel the muscles tightening on Tom's forearm, where her hand was lying. The tension, she knew, was due to his puzzlement at being involved in the quickness of wit,

sureness of words, that did not belong to his nature. His father had passed on to him his strength, his courage and the force of his will, but not the deftness of his mind.

'He wasn't a bad chap,' he said at last.

'Oh wasn't he?' said his father. 'Well, bad or not—he isn't having supper here.'

True to her principle of hedonism it was time for mam to intervene, and she did so. Like Jessie's father she'd been shocked to hear of her daughter's encounter with a soldier, but her curiosity had been pricked too. She was anxious to see him, to discover what kind of soldier could cultivate so uncompromising a daughter.

'Now, da,' she began, but her husband was ready for her.

'You keep out of this,' he said.

'He's *got* to have supper here,' said Jessie. 'I asked him.'

'*You* asked him,' said her father. 'You one of these new women we're reading about? A suffragette or something? When people get asked here, it's your mam and me who do the asking. We didn't invite any soldiers to supper.'

Jessie's temper finally went.

'He can have mine,' she said. 'After all, I paid for it.'

Bill Seaton flinched at that and Mary could still feel the tension through Tom's forearm, a tension that seemed as if it vibrated throughout his body. He turned to her and said, 'Come on, Mary. Let's get out of here and put a record on.' They left and went into the front room, a room used only for distinguished visitors or distinguished occasions: the visit of a minister or a councillor, the laying out of the dead, the ritual of courting.

Jessie looked at her father and knew how deeply she had hurt him.

'I'm sorry, dad,' she began, 'but—' A knock at the back door interrupted her and Ford's voice called out, 'Anybody at home?'

Jessie said in a whisper, 'Dad, he was with Mary's brother when he died.'

'All right,' Bill Seaton said at last, 'let him in. But mind you—just this once.' Jessie went to the back door and opened it. Ford stood there, holding a paper bag. The frankness of his expression told her that he'd overheard the row: told her, also, that it hadn't bothered him in the least.

'Good evening, Mr. Ford,' she said, and carefully he replied, 'Good evening, Miss Seaton.'

'Will you come in please?' she asked, and wondered at herself. There had been no need for that 'please'.

'Thanks,' said Ford, and took off his uniform cap as he went through. Unhesitatingly, without looking about him he went straight to the woman of the house.

'Mrs. Seaton,' he said, 'it was kind of you to let me come.'

Bella Seaton, who flustered easily, was flustered now.

'You're very welcome, lad, I'm sure,' she said.

From the other room came the sound of a gramophone playing: 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World'. That bloody war, thought Ford. Why did everything remind him of that bloody war? Even music. He turned to Jessie's father, 'Mr. Seaton,' he said, 'I'm very pleased to meet you.'

'Are you?' said Bill Seaton. But Jack Ford had faced better tigers than this one. He smiled one of his best smiles, the one with a bit of rueful melancholy in it and said, 'Well, I hope I'll be anyway.'

Bella Seaton looked at that smile, sensed the conscious artistry behind it and still thought him wonderful. Oh Jessie, she said to herself, what have you gone and done this time? If I was your age he'd never have had to whistle...

'I don't like any daughter of mine being picked up at the pictures,' said Bill Seaton.

'Neither would I, Mr. Seaton,' said Ford.

'It's what *you* did.'

Ford said, 'Your daughter and me got into an argument.'

Bella Seaton thought, oh Jessie no. Not an argument. Not with this one.

'Sort of a political argument,' said Ford.

Bella said despondently, 'Aye. It would be.'

But Ford continued, 'So she asked me back here to finish it, and I took the liberty of bringing a little something.' He opened the bag and took out whisky and bottled beer.

Bill Seaton said, 'There was no need.'

'Oh, please, Mr. Seaton,' Jack Ford said. 'Just to oblige me.'

Bill Seaton weakened. 'Well,' he said, 'it's very kind of you I must say.'

His wife had no such inhibitions.

'I'll get the glasses,' she said and went at once to the corner cupboard. As she did so Ford looked round to find Jessie regarding him intently.

'They seem to pay you well in the army,' she said.

Ford said, 'They don't pay me at all. Not now. I'm on discharge leave.'

She looked at the row of bottles on the table. At her mother eagerly setting out the glasses.

'You seem to be able to afford the necessities of life,' she said.

Jack Ford said, 'I'll always be able to do that.' He spoke in a voice of utter certainty.

Bill Seaton wanted to discuss the prospects of work for him now that he was out of the army, but the thought of the shipyards still bothered him. Jack was glad to be out of the army, but he couldn't face the fact that soon he'd be sweating on a ship's hull or working on its engine. To be polite was for once a struggle, and he went over to the whisky bottle, uncorked it and poured out three glasses, then looked enquiringly at Bella.

'Will you join us, Mrs. Seaton?' he asked.

Bella Seaton said, 'Just a drop, Mr. Ford. I've got a cold coming.'

Jack Ford took this in the spirit in which it was meant and poured out a fourth generous glassful.

'Oh I nearly forgot,' he said, and his hand disappeared into the paper bag, came out clutching a bottle of port.

'I hope you don't mind, Mr. Seaton,' he said. 'I thought maybe your daughter and Miss Routledge might fancy a drop.'

Bill Seaton said, 'You'll find there's a lot I don't mind, son, as long as I'm asked first.'

Jack poured out two glasses and handed one to Jessie who took it and said, 'How we ever managed without you I'll never know.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'It's got me puzzled an'all.'

She choked and put Tom's whisky and the two ports on a tray, picked it up and went out. Bella raised her glass. 'Well here's to you, Mr. Ford,' she said, and sipped genteelly. Bill Seaton took care of his in one sole swallow.

'Well, mother,' he said, 'let's get at it. I'm half starved.'

*

They fed him well, no question of it. Cold beef, pickles, tomatoes, lettuce fresh out of the garden, and the cake of Bella's own baking: beer for them who wanted it, and tea for them who didn't. Only Jessie and Mary wanted tea. For the time being at any rate it was obvious that the Seatons were in the money, and when miners were in the money they ate well. It was an act of faith, almost of religion; the storing up of memories for the bad times they knew lay ahead, but at the moment it was good time: the fire burned cheerfully in the bright little room, the chairs were hard but the deal table was scrubbed to the whiteness of bone and everything polishable had been polished: the cut steel of the oven and the grate, the brass of the fender, everything was spotless in a street where grime fell like rain. Jack Ford began to feel at home; it was a pleasant feeling, but it was also a feeling to beware of. He sat on, yarning with Bill Seaton, the whisky bottle comfortably between them, while Bella Seaton washed the dishes, then after a while stood up and reached for a dish cloth. It was getting more like home than ever. From the next room came the sound of the gramophone once more where Tom and Mary were dancing and Jessie, he was sure, would be watching;

waiting to see how long it would take him to join her ...

Tom and Mary were waltzing this time, the tune 'I'm for ever blowing bubbles'. They waltzed carefully and intently, and, as Jessie was there, not too close but sometimes, as now, the feel of the other's hands and arms was enough ... inevitably they talked of Ford.

'Well, I think he's nice,' said Mary.

'Too bloody sure of himself if you ask me,' said Tom and instantly found he had to apologise. Jessie said as if questioning herself, 'Where would he get hold of a word like ironic? And using it right? What he said about that picture—there was a lot of sense in that.'

But Mary had no time for irony.

'He's a bonny looking lad,' she said.

Jessie, impatient with a lack of logic, said, 'What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing,' said Mary. 'He just is.' The music stopped and having given her opinion of another man Mary stayed in Tom's arms and smiled up at him.

Jessie said, 'I wonder what he wanted to come here for anyway?'

Still smiling at Tom, Mary said, 'Don't you know? ...'

It seemed, for the moment at any rate, as if he'd come to help Bella with the washing up. The father, more amenable now, watched them at it, smoked his pipe, sipped his whisky.

'Best meal I've had in a long while, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford.

'Haven't you a mam to look after you?' Bella asked.

'Not any more. I'm in lodgings,' said Ford.

'Oh I'm sorry,' said Bella. Ford smiled and this time there was nothing conscious in it at all, only memory.

'So am I,' he said. 'I had a lovely mam.' He wiped another plate and set it on the stand beside him.

'There's a good lad,' said Bella.

Bill Seaton said, 'In the army long were you, son?'

'Right through the war,' said Ford. 'I was in the Territorials.'

'And never got hurt?' said Bella.

Ford said, 'Not where I could show you, Mrs. Seaton.'

She laughed at that and cuffed him, a fierce yet friendly gesture.

'And you knew Mary's brother,' Bill Seaton said. Ford nodded.

Bella said, 'Joe Routledge never seemed cut out for the army.'

Ford said, 'I don't think anybody is, Mrs. Seaton. Not with the kind of war we fight nowadays.'

'All the same—' Bella said, but her husband interrupted her.

'She lost her mam and dad,' he said. 'All in six months. 1917 that was.'

'Two years ago,' said Bella. 'She'd just started going out with our Tom. Her dad was in the Merchant Navy—torpedoed. Her mam died of T.B., poor bairn.'

Bill Seaton said emphatically, 'We are all the family she's got, Mr. Ford.'

Ford said easily, 'I should think that would be enough, Mr Seaton.' Bill Seaton knocked out his pipe into the grate and said, 'I think I'll take another sup of that whisky.'

He poured out three as the gramophone started up once more.

Bella Seaton said, 'You go in and have a dance, Mr. Ford.'

'But I haven't finished the dishes,' said Ford.

'Nor you won't neither,' said Bella then looked witheringly at her husband, 'any more than he will.' She handed Ford his whisky. 'You go and dance.'

*

In the Seatons' front room Tom and Mary were experimenting with a dance called the Tickle Toe while Jessie watched. They weren't perhaps doing it very well, but they were happy; they were together. Jack came in and stood beside Jessie. She looked at once at his glass and said, 'Still keeping your strength up?'

'If I'm going back to work I'll need to,' said Ford.

'And are you?' she asked.

'Maybe,' said Ford. 'Like to dance?'

'You mean you can?' she asked.

'I'm a very good dancer,' said Ford. 'Taught Vernon and Irene Castle.'

'Did you indeed?' said Jessie. 'Then I'll try to be worthy of you.'

He said simply as one stating an obvious fact, 'You'll always be that.'

And before she could react he took her in his arms and they danced. He danced much better than she did. 'They teach you to dance like that in France?'

'They teach you all kinds of things in France,' said Ford.

She moved away from him.

'I dare say,' she said and they danced a few bars in silence. Then—'That chap,' she said. 'The one that fell down ... are there a lot like him?'

'Enough,' said Ford.

'And you came through without a scratch?'

'Oh I picked up a few scratches,' he said. 'Here and there.' They danced once more in silence.

In the kitchen Bella put away the last of the dishes. 'He's a bonny looking lad all right,' she said.

'Looks isn't everything,' her husband said.

'It's a start,' she said.

'After hearing wedding bells again? Wait till you've got our Tom off our hands. There's only a few more days,' said her husband.

Bella said, 'Jack Ford's not the sort you can rush, da.'

Seaton grunted. 'Free with his money, I'll say that for him,' he said, 'when he's got it. All the same—' he paused; something was worrying him. Bella poured them both another whisky.

'All the same what?' she asked. Bill Seaton said, 'Like you say—a canny looking feller. And a nice way with him an'all.'

Bella said, 'He's what they call charming. He's got that all right.'

Bill Seaton said, 'Then what the hell does he see in our Jessie?' What he saw was a worrier, somebody concerned with other people's misfortunes, and that would never do.

They were still dancing, back this time with 'They didn't believe me'. She felt good in his arms, and so moving better, relaxed just a little, trusting him more. But she was still going on about shell-shock.

'They ought to do something for chaps like that,' she said.

Ford said, 'Who ought to?'

'Well the Government, silly,' she said. 'Ought to,' said Ford, and chuckled. 'You going to make them?'

'Somebody should,' said Jessie Seaton.

'Aye,' said Ford, 'somebody.' He chuckled again. Jessie looked away and twisted free from his arms. Suddenly she realised that they were alone.

'Where's Tom and Mary?' she asked.

'Counting the stars,' said Ford.

'Spooning,' she said. Her embarrassment was almost tangible.

Ford said, 'That's right.' Very gently, not holding her, he kissed her on the mouth. 'Spooning,' he said. 'See owt wrong with it?'

'Your breath smells of whisky,' she said.

Ford said, 'Yours smells of port. We'll both just have to get used to it.' Jessie bridled instantly. 'Will we indeed?'

'Aye, we will.'

He kissed her again. This time his arms came round her and she stiffened, then responded and at last broke free. He made no attempt to force her to stay. But she was in no doubt that he could have done so with ease.

'I don't want you to do that any more,' she said.

He looked at her, smiling. 'You didn't like it?' he asked.

She said, 'Of course I liked it. All the same—no more.'

The smile lingered. 'Not tonight, anyway,' she said. He

looked so sure of himself that she snapped at him. She couldn't help it.

'Do you never believe what people tell you?' she said.

He said, 'Not often, not any more.' He thought for a moment then continued, 'What the hell am I doing here, sergeant, I said I'd be at the Savile.'

Jessie said, 'I suppose you know what you're talking about.'

Ford said, 'Aye, Captain Manners, Captain Peter James Bertram Manners, M.C., twice mentioned in despatches.' A bit later he said, 'I'll have the whitebait I think, and a steak. Tell them to make sure it's not overdone. Green peas with the steak. And a bottle of the club claret.' Ford drank his whisky. 'And I said, "Yes sir, right away sir." He believed me, but I didn't believe him.'

'Where was this?' said Jessie. 'At Wipers,' said Ford.

'But what happened to him?'

'Shell burst,' said Ford. 'He died ... No, Jessie Seaton, I don't often believe what people tell me.'

3

A man can be simultaneously in his bed in a ground floor flat in Gallowshield in 1919 and in a trench on the Somme in 1916. Will Scrimgour was doing both. As he slept he could hear all the most terrible, significant sounds of World War One: the distant rumble of artillery, the rattle of machine guns much nearer, the whine and crunch of Moaning Minnies. Suddenly he could hear shouted orders, the scrabble of feet on duckboards, the click of a rifle bolt. Scrimgour rolled over so that he was lying on his stomach. His face looking through the rails of the bedhead at the wall. He was on the Somme, all right, and he was fast asleep. Eyes closed he said, 'Can't see a bloody thing, sarge. Black as hell out there.' The rattle of machine guns intensified; the pop pop of rifles now too became audible and Scrimgour grinned.

'Old Fritz can't sleep, that's the trouble. Ought to get himself a sleeping draught.' Asleep himself Scrimgour yawned and said aloud, 'Give us the old stand-to, sarge.' Then, as always happened, though you never knew it was going to happen until just before it did, there came the sound of the shell screaming out, the intolerable clamour of its explosion, the roar of earth falling. Scrimgour moved at once from prone to a kind of foetal position except that his hands were clasped over his head. He was wide awake now and screaming at the top of his voice: 'Mammy! Mammy! Mammy!' His wife came running in, leaving her made-up bed in the kitchen. It was impossible for her to sleep with her husband—he needed the whole bed to fight the war in. As a man he was finished, perhaps as a human being he was finished, but he was hers,

and she came running, gathered him into her arms and let him sob, hushing and crooning to him as she had once hushed and crooned to their baby son, now a boy of ten who stood in the doorway of the bedroom and watched wide-eyed.

4

As the weeks went by and Mary's wedding day drew nearer, Jack Ford found himself becoming more and more a part of the family, a family which in its own way was beginning to accept him. There were reservations, even so, but the acceptance was there. Bill Seaton deplored the fact that anybody as likeable as Jack Ford should not be a miner, Bella worried that anyone as likeable as Jack Ford should have become so important to her touchy, vulnerable daughter. Tom's feelings too were mixed: here was a man who had done everything that he, Tom, had ever wished to do, a man who could dominate a pub or club, effortlessly, as if it were hardly worth trying; a man who had been to France and survived and wore the ribbon of the Military Medal. A man to whom women were not a demanding, longed for enigma, but a pleasant enough hobby in their way, like playing football or drinking beer. There was jealousy in Tom, and there was admiration too. Jessie's reactions were inevitably complex. She was in love with this man, simply, uncomplicatedly in love with him, a fact that scared her too much even to contemplate: but she was impatient with him too. So much in their world had gone awry; even in the boom time that followed the war there was poverty, hunger, exploitation; and of all the men she had ever met Jack Ford seemed to her the best equipped, physically and mentally, to combat these evils. Even at school, when the children, heads down over their desks, worked away at the exact number of times that seven will go into 133, she thought about Ford, found herself wondering what her brother Billy would make of him when he came home for the wedding. She

and Billy were very much alike, she knew, in their attitudes to politics and the suffering they saw about them. Billy's good opinion of Jack was something she longed for, but Billy had her father's stern streak of puritanism in him. It would be a good opinion that Jack would have to earn.

He wasn't earning it at the moment. Still in uniform, he spent what remained of his discharge pay and—something she knew nothing about, would never know about—the money he had acquired while serving in Murmansk: bribes timidly offered, cheerfully accepted. So long as the money lasted he had no intention of working. There were treats: cinema, theatre, music hall, sometimes with her alone, sometimes for all the family. Money she told him that he'd earned with his blood he poured out like water. But all he did was laugh, and when he laughed she knew how much she loved him. He was drinking heavily too, but in a contained sort of way that knew exactly the difference between enough and too much, touring the pubs in search of lost companions.

That day it was the 'Bluebell'. He sat alone by the bar, a pint of beer in front of him, when suddenly someone struck him on the back. Not a nudge, not a clumsy piece of manoeuvring, but a deliberate, carefully calculated blow. He spun round like a flash, fist up and ready, and found himself looking at Matt Headley. Slowly he relaxed. Good old Matt ... as chubby as ever, but still with a lot of muscle in that fat. Jack Ford grinned.

'I might have known,' he said. 'What'll you have, corporal?'

'Less of your corporal,' Headley said, 'I'm out now and I've got my discharge to prove it.'

'All right, *Mr.* Headley,' said Ford. 'What'll you have?'

Matt Headley looked oddly embarrassed at having to reply to so simple a question.

'I'll get them,' he said at last. 'I—er—brought a mate with me.'

Ford looked past Headley towards the door. The disorientated man stood there, comparatively calm for once, but the

wildness was there, lurking, waiting to surface.

'I see you have,' said Ford. 'What'll *he* have?'

Matt Headley still looked embarrassed.

'I said I'll get them,' he said.

'And I say you won't,' said Ford, then, to the barman: 'Three pints.'

'Will can't help it, Jack,' Matt Headley said.

'I'm not saying he can,' said Ford. 'But he does it all the bloody time.'

'We were marrers,* Jack. Before the war even, I can't just walk past him.'

The beer arrived. Ford shrugged, handed a pint to Headley and called out to the man by the door. Will Scrimgour, one of the best men in his company, and look at him. 'Will!' he called. 'Come on over.'

Will Scrimgour stiffened to attention, and marched rather than walked to where Ford stood.

'Yes, sergeant?' he said.

Ford said, 'That's all finished, son. The name's Jack here.'

He pushed a beer over to Scrimgour.

'Thanks, sergeant,' Scrimgour said.

Patiently Ford repeated, 'The name's Jack, son. This is 1919. The war's over.'

Scrimgour said, 'Over ... aye.' But he seemed to have difficulty in believing it. 'The trouble is I keep forgetting.'

Matt Headley looked away embarrassed and said to Ford, 'What you still dress like a sergeant for?'

Ford said, 'Leave pending discharge it says on the chit. And anyway none of my clothes fit.'

'You took your time getting out,' said Headley.

Ford said, 'I went to Russia.'

'Did you, by God,' said Headley. 'What was it like?'

'Cold,' said Ford. Just that and no more.

He didn't want to talk about Murmansk, not even to Matt Headley. 'This your local then?'

* Mates.

'Aye,' said Matt. 'We're living in Temple Street. I've just been seeing my sister off. She's in service in Hexham.'

'She'll not be short of a job,' said Ford.

'Nobody is,' Headley said.

'Not yet,' said Ford. 'Gone back to the shipyards, have you?'

'No,' said Headley. 'I've done a bit better than that. I'm a maintenance man at the colliery now.'

'God Almighty, I'd have thought you'd have had enough of being buried alive—' He broke off and looked across at Will Scrimgour whose hand shook as it held the now half-empty glass. The wild look had returned to his face. 'What's up with you?' Ford asked.

Will Scrimgour said, 'The Somme was the worst, wasn't it, sergeant?'

Ford looked away. 'They were all bad,' he said.

But Scrimgour persisted. 'The Somme was the worst,' he said. 'I didn't mind Wipers or any of them. I mean it was like it said on that poster. Old Kitchener. Your King and country needs you. I mean it was right. You could even say it was fair.'

Softly Ford said, 'Could you?'

Scrimgour went on unheeding. 'But not the Somme,' he said. 'The Somme was asking too much. I mean gas and shells and machine guns, Moaning Minnies. That was all right. I mean you expected it. But on the Somme they buried you alive. They shouldn't have done that, sergeant. That was too much.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'It was. Finish your beer.'

Scrimgour ignored him. His voice began to rise to the beginning of a scream. 'Never breathing,' he said, 'never seeing, covered in soil and muck.'

Gently Matt Headley said, 'Now, Will lad.'

'And everybody else was dead,' said Scrimgour. 'Even the rats was dead.'

Ford put down his glass. 'Scrimgour!' he said, his voice a sergeant's.

Scrimgour stiffened to attention once more. 'Yes, sergeant?'

'Shut your gob,' said Ford and Scrimgour was instantly silent. Ford relented. 'Do you go to the doctor, son?' he asked.

'Yes, sergeant,' said Scrimgour.

'Gives you medicine, does he?'

'Tonic,' said Scrimgour. 'Gives me a tonic. He says my nerves is bad.'

Ford said, 'What a clever doctor he must be. Owt else?'

'No excitement, he says. Plenty of rest,' said Scrimgour. 'Avoid alcoholic beverages.'

Ford glared at Headley and said softly, 'You stupid bugger.'

Headley said, 'He never told me, Jack. Honest.'

'He doesn't bloody know,' said Ford. 'You'd better get him home.'

'You staying here?' said Headley. 'I'll come straight back.'

Ford said, 'Give me an hour. I've got to go back and polish me brasses.'

Headley was incredulous. 'On discharge leave?' he said.

'I'm going to a wedding.'

More incredulous still, Matt Headley said, 'Yours?'

Ford took another pull at his beer. 'Not yet, bonny lad,' he said, 'not yet.'

•

When Billy got back there wasn't much time to tell him about Jack Ford. He'd seen the by-election posters on his way home from the station and even though his brother was about to be married that day he felt the itch for action. There would be meetings, he knew, speeches made extolling the virtues of Major Pinner, the Liberal candidate, and when they were made Billy wanted to be there and heckle, had to be there and heckle. Inevitably Jessie went with him.

They were in luck: the very first meeting they went to was being addressed by Pinner himself. He stood at the corner of Thames Street, mounted on the back of a lorry, and harangued a crowd that was adulatory, far too adulatory for

Billy's taste. These people whom the Pinners of this world accepted, were actually impressed by Pinner, and this wouldn't do. They were not fools, but now they were behaving foolishly and had to be made aware of their foolishness. He and Jessie penetrated into the crowd. Pinner was in full cry.

'I am aware,' he said, 'and no man more so—of the debt this country of ours owes to its brave sons. The Army, the Navy, the Royal Flying Corps have all set an example of selfless heroism that will never be surpassed.'

Very deep within the crowd, Billy called out, 'Where were you then?'

But this was bad tactics. Pinner didn't even look into the faces in front of him to seek the gadfly unable to sting. 'I did my share,' he said. 'Service in Flanders and an honourable discharge. I speak as a soldier talking to soldiers.' It was Jessie's turn. 'Then why don't you do something for them?' she yelled.

That was better, but Pinner still had his answer.

'Return me in this election and I will,' he said. 'Mr. Lloyd George, our great leader, has promised you a land fit for heroes to live in. Return me as your representative and I will help to fulfil that promise.'

Billy tried again. 'Does that mean you will abolish the slums?' he called.

'Certainly,' said Pinner.

'Including the ones you own?' called Billy.

This was bang on target.

Pinner said testily, 'There is, as you know, a shortage of building material, but once that is overcome I can assure you—'

'Never mind assuring,' said Billy. 'What about housing?'

'A land fit for heroes means homes fit for heroes,' said Pinner, 'and I promise you they will be forthcoming.'

He was a big man, clean shaven, with the look of a successful prelate about him; an ecclesiastical overtone that had done him no harm in politics. His voice too had something of the priest's about it, a kind of reverent unction, and his words drew a smattering of applause, but Billy had planted seed

which had seemed to have taken root. There was a rumble of disbelief too. Jessie pressed on with the attack.

'What about equal voting rights for women?' said Jessie.

Pinner said, 'The government is not uninterested. One day it will come.'

'Well, when it does,' said Jessie, 'I'll not be voting for you.'

There was laughter at this, but Jessie didn't smile: she glared instead at the men around her who had applauded Pinner.

'I'd have more sense,' she said.

Lovely stuff, but it had to end there or they'd be late for Tom and Mary's wedding.

•

Matt Headley, arms round Scrimgour's shoulders, eased him deftly through the doorway of the bedroom, and helped him on to the bed. Skin and bone, he thought, that's all he is. Just skin and bone. He turned to Mrs. Scrimgour hovering anxiously in the doorway.

'Have you got enough to eat?' he asked.

'We manage,' she said, 'the bairn and me, but Will won't eat. I've asked him and asked him and all he says is he can't.'

Scrimgour stirred restlessly on the bed and Matt went to him, pressed him gently back on to the pillows.

'There, there, bonny lad,' he said. 'Just you put your feet up.'

Scrimgour surrendered. He lay on the bed like a soldier at attention, his eyes staring at the ceiling. Matt Headley thought: I bet the Somme's on the ceiling too like a bloody picture that never comes to an end.

Scrimgour's wife said, 'I do wish he wouldn't go out.'

Her hands went up to her face. Matt looked at her helplessly then turned back to Scrimgour.

'Try and have a bit of a kip, Will,' he said

'No, Matt.'

'It'll do you good,' said Headley.

Scrimgour looked at him almost in pity at such ignorance. 'Matt,' he said, 'when you sleep don't you ever dream?'

*

They did the wedding in style. Married in chapel—Tom and Mary were both chapel—but after that they'd hired the Miners' Lodge Hall and a pianist. This was going to be a wedding to remember. Good grub, beer and whisky for the men, port and sherry for the ladies, all you could dance and all you could sup. A real old-fashioned wedding. The kind that Tom and Mary could look back on and remember with pride.

Her bride clothes suited Mary and their whiteness enhanced her fragile, vulnerable prettiness. Tom in his best suit, bought new for the occasion, was bursting with a sense of achievement. He loved his brother and sister but this time it was he who was at the centre of a congratulating crowd. Even so it was Jessie and Billy who received their father's attention, and he wasn't congratulating them.

'Your own brother's wedding,' he said, 'and you two leave it to the last minute.'

'We couldn't help it, dad,' said Jessie, but Bill Seaton would have none of it.

'Of course you could help it,' he said.

'I was that worried,' said Bella.

'We all were,' Bill Seaton said. 'Where the hell were you? You only left yourself five minutes to change.'

'We passed old Pinner's meeting,' said Billy. 'He was telling that many lies—'

'We couldn't just go on by and say nothing,' said Jessie.

Bill Seaton said, 'You went to a bloody meeting when your brother was getting married?'

His voice was a powerful one: he'd addressed a few meetings in his time. As he spoke the minister passed him and winced. So did Bill Seaton.

'Now look what you've done,' he muttered, and turned to the minister. 'Glad you could come, reverend,' he said.

'I mustn't stay too long,' the minister said and it was obvious that the word 'bloody' still rankled, 'I must just have a word with the bride and the lucky young man.' He moved away.

'In front of the reverend,' said Bella. 'Language.'

Bill Seaton said, 'It wasn't my fault,' but the thought of it made him angrier than ever. 'Have you apologised to Tom and Mary?' he asked.

'Oh aye,' said Billy. 'They didn't know what we were talking about.' As he spoke Jessie looked round the room at the guests and her father had his revenge.

'If you're looking for your sergeant,' he said, 'he hasn't showed up.'

But to Bella one wedding was only a springboard to the next. 'He will, da,' she said, and winked at Jessie.

•

Jack Ford was about to leave the pub. He hadn't seen Matt Headley in years, but he had to be at that wedding. As he finished his drink Headley hurried in with his fat man's bustling speed and said, 'I'm sorry, Jack. I got talking to Will's missus. She's that worried.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Ford and put down his empty glass. 'I've got to go.'

Matt Headley said, 'Oh come on, Jack. Just a quick pint. It's been nigh on 20 months now.'

'All right then,' said Ford, 'just one,' and Headley ordered.

'Whose wedding is it?' he asked.

Ford said, 'Mary Routledge. She's marrying a feller called Tom Seaton. Ninth Battalion man.'

'Lucky bugger,' said Matt. 'I don't think I know her, do I?'

Ford watched as the beer arrived and Matt paid. When the barman had gone he said, 'You knew her brother.'

'What? Not Josie Routledge's sister?'

'That's right,' said Ford.

'Well I'll go to hell,' said Headley. 'Still it's not surprising.

He made a bloody good bride himself. Is she as bonny as he was?'

'She is.'

Headley said, 'I bet Joe was jealous.'

'I don't think he was the jealous sort,' said Ford.

'Does this Seaton feller know her brother was a nance?' Headley asked.

'No,' said Ford.

'There'll be hell when he finds out,' Headley said.

'He won't find out,' said Ford. 'Not unless you tell him.'

'It's none of my business,' Headley said.

'That's right,' said Ford.

'All the same,' said Headley, 'somebody should have warned the poor feller.'

Ford said, 'Joe Routledge is dead, Matt. And so is his fancy man.'

Headley said, 'But there's others must know.'

'Not know, Matt, suspect,' said Ford. 'You were the one that found him and told me—I fetched Captain Manners. All very right and proper. He ordered them under close arrest and two minutes later they were dead and he was dying.'

'Maybe they were lucky at that,' said Headley.

'Maybe they were,' said Ford. 'All the same I wish I hadn't done it.'

'Done what, man?' said Headley.

'Fetched Captain Manners,' said Ford. 'Now I'd better get rid of this pint and be off to the wedding.' He took a long swallow and looked hard at Headley. 'You'll keep your mouth shut, Matt,' he said.

*

It was still a good wedding. The booze was flowing, the piano playing, the minister had gone. Time now for the traditional jokes and innuendoes that made Mary blush, turn Tom redder than ever. Bill Seaton looked at his watch.

'I think we should make a start,' he said. 'Get some food into them before the drink runs out.'

'Hold on a minute,' said Jessie. 'I haven't finished my port.'

Her mother knew better than that.

'He'll be along, pet, don't worry.'

'Who is this feller anyway?' said Billy.

Tom said, 'Jessie's chap.'

'He is not,' said Jessie, and for a moment she was five years younger, a gawky and embarrassed girl rather than a competent schoolteacher.

'Oh you fibber,' said Mary. 'You ask me, there'll be another wedding in the Seaton family before long.'

'Give over, Mary,' said Jessie, but she wasn't displeased.

It was Billy who showed displeasure.

'You never told me,' he said.

'How could I?' said Jessie. 'I only just met him.'

'A soldier,' said Billy and there was a wealth of condemnation in the two words.

Bella rushed at once in defence of her idol. 'A real bonny lad,' she said and as she spoke, Ford came in.

'Not too late to kiss the bride, am I?' he asked, and did so. Bill Seaton watched dourly.

'Trust you,' he said.

'What's up then, Mr. Seaton?' said Ford.

'Trust you to get here when the booze is open and the minister's gone,' Bill Seaton said and handed Ford a drink.

'This is my youngest—Billy,' he said, and the gruffness in his voice, Ford knew, served only to reveal his pride.

'How do you do?' said Ford.

'How do you do?' said Billy without enthusiasm.

Bella said proudly, 'Our Billy's a medical student.'

'By,' said Ford, 'you've got an educated family'

'A schoolteacher already, and a doctor on the way,' Bill Seaton said. 'They've done well, the pair of them.'

But this was Tom's wedding day.

'Our Tom's as good as either of them,' said Bella, and Tom

turned redder than ever. Once more Mary could feel the tension in the hard muscle of his forearm.

'Did I say he wasn't?' Bill Seaton said. 'Now did I?'

Jack Ford rushed in and said to Billy, 'Stick at it, lad, I bet it's not easy.'

'Thanks for the advice,' said Billy and turned away.

Jessie said embarrassed, 'Billy!' Then, as always, embarrassment could only be covered by aggression. She turned on Ford. 'What made you so late?' she said.

Her mother chuckled. 'Look who's talking,' she said.

'Something came up,' said Ford.

'In a pub I'll bet,' said Jessie.

'Aye,' said Ford. 'In a pub. You'd be surprised the things that come up in pubs.'

Tom Seaton, still tense, said to him, 'I'd like a word with you, Jack—if you've got a minute.'

'Not now, lad,' said Bill. 'Folks is fair starved.'

But Tom persisted. 'Later on then,' he said.

Ford said easily, 'Any time, Tom, any time.'

Bill Seaton said firmly, 'Let's get at it.' Then he raised his voice to an effortless orator's bellow. 'Ladies and Gentlemen,' he bawled out, 'I don't know how you feel but me belly thinks me throat's cut. Let's eat.'

•

The Liberal Party lorry had rattled its way to the corner of Severn Street. Once again Pinner had collected a sizeable audience, and once again he was able to turn on his priestly charm, this time unhampered by hecklers in the crowd.

'The man who has fought for his country,' he intoned, 'has a right to ask –no, *demand* –that his country should know of his wants and needs. I have heard stories of gallant and honourable men in want; in need of the very bread to keep them alive—through no fault of their own My party cannot and will not tolerate this. Return me and I give you my word . . .'

On and on, the flow of bland yet majestic oratory. Half

promises, half truths, meant at the time, their sole purpose to impress, cajole, drive the pale and ill-clad voters in front of him to the polling-booths, to put 'X' beside the name of Pinner.

■

When the meal was over it was time for dancing, and the guests danced with the same kind of furious vigour that they brought to eating and drinking. A real old-fashioned wedding...

After the food Jessie had relented and danced with Jack Ford. He still danced better than she did, but it didn't worry her, not any more. She was becoming used to the fact that when Jack Ford wished to excel, he excelled. The dance finished, and Jack led Jessie back to where Tom and Billy were chatting.

Tom said at once, 'Can I have that word now, Jack?'

'All right,' said Ford.

'You look awfully serious, Tom,' Jessie said.

'No no,' said Tom. 'Just want a bit of a chat that's all.'

He led Jack out of the hall to a tiny office and Billy watched them leave.

'So that's your dashing soldier,' said Billy. Jessie smiled.

'He's dashing all right,' she said, 'but he's not mine yet.'

'Do you want him to be?'

Jessie stuck to her usual pattern, first embarrassment then attack.

'Do you?' she asked.

'None of my business,' said Billy.

'No,' said Jessie. 'It's not.'

The piano started up again, a veleta this time. 'Are you going to dance with your sister?' she asked. 'Or are you too proud?'

They danced. The music sounded softly in the little office where Tom and Jack sat facing each other, each with a drink in his hand. Tom, his face working, said at last, 'I was having a drink in the bar the other night.'

'Nothing wrong with drink in moderation,' said Ford and lifted his glass.

'Please, Jack,' said Tom. 'No jokes, not this time.'

Ford shrugged. 'All right,' he said.

'I got talking to a chap. He was in your battalion,' said Tom. Ford waited. 'He knew Joe. Mary's brother.'

Ford drank again, unimpressed so it seemed, perhaps even bored.

Tom said, 'You knew him an'all. Didn't you?'

Ford said, 'Joe Routledge? Aye, I knew him. Died of wounds at Wipers, poor little devil.'

As he spoke Bill Seaton came into the office

Tom said, 'This feller said—he said—that Joe—'

'Leave it, Tom,' Bill Seaton said. 'It's finished, man.'

But Tom said, 'No, da. I've got to know. He said Joe was a—he went with men. That he was a nancy.'

Ford said, 'Joe Routledge?' His voice incredulous.

'That's what this feller told me,' said Tom.

'Good God Almighty,' said Ford. 'He's dead, Tom, I told you—'

Tom said, 'But even so—'

'And what difference would it make anyway?' Ford said. 'You're married now. It's too late.'

'You think I want to get out of it?' said Tom.

'Looks that way.'

Tom said, 'I ought to knock your bloody block off.'

He stood up but Ford remained seated, still apparently bored at the conversation. Bill Seaton grabbed his son's arm. 'Tom, for God's sake,' he said.

'On your wedding day an'all,' said Ford. He looked from the office window out into the hall where Mary and Billy were now dancing.

'Take a look at your wife, man,' he said and Tom did so, began to relax. 'Why listen to gossip, Tom?'

Tom said, 'Because of her—can't you see—her only brother...'

'So I suppose you're going to find this chap who told you and knock his bloody block off?' said Ford.

'I already did,' said Tom and Ford chuckled.

'So it's settled,' he said.

'No,' said Tom. 'It's not. He still said it was true.'

'Well, it's not,' said Ford. 'Hell, man. He was in my platoon. I was his sergeant. Do you think I wouldn't know? Joe Routledge was 18 years old and as straight as a die. I'm telling you.'

But Tom still looked doubtful.

'All right,' said Ford. 'If you don't believe me you can go and see a feller called Matt Headley. He lives in Temple Street, No. 19. He was a corporal. Joe was in his half-section. He'll tell you the same.'

Tom said, 'Maybe I'll go.'

'Maybe you should,' said Ford, 'but have your honeymoon first.'

Tom looked again at Jack Ford, so certain of himself, so bloody sane. What he said was right, no question, and yet that feller he'd flattened had still sworn he had told the truth. Tom went back to Mary.

Bill Seaton said, 'You're lying, Jack.'

'Am I?' said Ford.

'Of course you are,' Bill Seaton said. 'I'd heard stories about Joe Routledge even before he joined.' Ford sat silent. 'I didn't believe them,' said Bill Seaton, 'not then. But I do now.'

Ford shrugged. 'Suit yourself,' he said. 'I've told you all I know.'

Bill Seaton said, 'Not all, lad.'

'Tom's happy, Mr. Seaton,' said Ford. 'Don't spoil it.'

'I know, and I'm grateful,' said Seaton. 'You're a good lad, Jack. All the same I'm one that likes the truth.'

Suddenly Jack Ford looked weary. 'The truth?' he said. 'All right, Mr. Seaton. Him and his mate were just about blown to bits. When we dug them out—what was left of them—they had their arms round each other. Maybe they'd been kissing—

it was too late to tell for sure If you ask me, that wouldn't be a bad way to die.'

■

The Liberal Party lorry had moved on to Avon Street, and as usual it was parked on a corner, as usual it had collected a crowd. It was perhaps unfortunate that Will Scrimgour lived on the corner of Avon Street, even more unfortunate that the theme of Major Pinner's speech was still heroic sacrifice.

'Nor must we forget our heroic dead,' said the sonorous voice, 'and the loved ones they left behind, their widows, their children. My party takes them all to its heart They shall not be forgotten. Their supreme sacrifice was not made in vain. Our wounded heroes too are in our hearts and in our minds and, my friends, I promise you this. their sufferings shall be rewarded.'

Will Scrimgour squirmed restlessly on his bed. His wife looked wearily down on him. Will was her man and she would stand by him, but she found the process exhausting, almost unbearable.

'You all right, Will?' she asked.

'Aye,' said Will, but his voice was weary.

From outside Pinner's voice went inexorably on: 'A nation would be stony-hearted indeed that could forget what these men have sacrificed and endured that you and I shall live in freedom. We have promised them a land fit for heroes, and if my party is returned, in a land fit for heroes they shall live.' The applause was deafening.

Will Scrimgour said, 'If only that fellow would stop talking.'

'I'll shut the window,' said his wife, and she did so: Pinner's voice was cut off in mid-stride. 'Did you take your medicine?' she asked, and Scrimgour nodded.

'I met Matt Headley today,' he said. 'He was in "B" company.'

Patiently his wife said, 'I know, Will. He brought you home.'

But Scrimgour didn't hear her. 'And Sergeant Ford,' he said. 'They both said I was right, Lucy.'

'What about?' his wife asked.

'The Somme,' said Scrimgour. 'The Somme was the worst. They both said so.'

'Now, Will,' his wife said. 'The doctor told you—'

'He wasn't buried alive, was he?' said Scrimgour.

'Will! Please!' said Lucy Scrimgour. She wept. At once Scrimgour showed concern, left the safety of the bed and put his arms about his wife.

'Lucy, hinny,' he said. 'What's wrong?'

'Please don't tell me again,' she said. 'I don't think I could stand it.'

Scrimgour released her. 'I'd better go out,' he said.

'But the doctor said you should rest,' said his wife.

'No,' said Scrimgour. 'I'm better when I'm walking. It stops me having to think.'

Abruptly, in his disorientated soldierly manner, he left her.

■

In the Miners' Lodge Hall, gay with bunting and flowers that could never quite obscure the images of folk heroes, Keir Hardie, Peter Lee, the born leaders, the fighters for justice, Jessie and Billy took a rest from dancing and talked about Billy's latest discovery: psychology, and in particular the psychology of children, the sway of mood, the violence, the oversudden surrender to the strength of the adult.

'There's a boy in my class—Fred Scrimgour,' said Jessie. 'He's one of the quiet ones. Withdrawn.'

'Any idea why?' Billy asked.

'I found out just the other day,' said Jessie. 'His father was in the army—blown up by a shell. He has sort of nightmares—sometimes when he's not even asleep. Shell-shock do you call it?'

'Aye,' said Billy. 'Sort of nervous breakdown.'

'That's right,' Jessie said. 'Jack and I saw him the first time we met. A motor-bike passed him—and he just dropped flat.'

The mere mention of his name was enough for her. She looked about her and saw Jack waltzing with Mary. With a pang she realized how gracefully they danced, but Mary's thoughts were not of dancing.

'Tom asked you about our Joe, didn't he?' said Mary.

'Aye,' said Jack.

'What did you tell him?' she asked, and then, 'please, Jack.'

'What could I tell him?' said Ford. 'He was a good lad and he died like a man.'

'Oh Jack,' said Mary, and looked up at him gratefully worshipful, but Jessie saw only the worship The music stopped.

Ford said, 'I think it's time you were getting back to your husband,' and took her over to Tom then joined Jessie and Billy.

Jessie told herself: You will not have a row, Jessie Seaton. You will behave pleasantly for once. He doesn't mean it, and even if he did, he can't help it.

Aloud she said, 'I was telling our Billy about that chap we saw—the one that dropped flat when the motor-bike went bang I just found out the other day—his son's in my class.'

'Getaway,' said Ford. 'Will Scrimgour's bairn?'

'You never told me you knew him,' said Jessie.

Ford said, 'You never asked me, bonny lass.'

Jessie's good resolutions vanished.

'You let him lie there in the street and never even crossed over to help him,' she said.

'We're all Pharisees sometimes, Jessie,' said Ford.

'We don't have to be. That was a man you knew.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'He was. But he doesn't know me. He doesn't know anybody. He's still fighting at the Somme, poor Will—and he'll stay there till he dies.'

'You could have done *something*,' said Jessie.

'Such as what, bonny lass?'

'You're just selfish, Jack Ford,' she said. 'Selfish all the way through.'

She walked away and he made no move except to reach for a half-finished drink.

Billy said, 'I didn't know you were a religious man, Mr. Ford.'

'What? Oh—the Pharisees. It's marvellous what you learn at church parade.'

'And the poor madman locked in time,' said Billy. 'Did you learn about him at church parade too?'

'No,' said Ford. 'But I was there when they dug him out and I've talked to him since. It didn't need a genius to work that one out ... Excuse me.'

He got up and went over to Bella. From where Billy sat he could see his mother protesting, laughing at the same time, affecting the coyness that showed him just how pretty she had once been. The next moment she had risen and Ford had taken her in his arms. They were dancing together, and dancing well.

Billy thought for a moment and then went over to Jessie.

'I think you're making a mistake, Jess.'

'What about?' said Jessie.

'Your dashing soldier.'

'I've told you before—he's not mine.'

Billy said, 'He could be.'

His sister looked at him suspiciously.

'I thought you didn't like him,' she said.

'I thought so an'all,' said Billy. 'I was wrong.'

'Oh Billy.' Then Jessie's voice was almost a wail, 'Not you as well. Charm the birds off the trees Jack would, but he's got no heart at all.'

'You're wrong, Jess,' said Billy. 'I'm sure you're wrong.'

He looked across to where Ford was dancing with his mother: he had never seen his mother look happier, more aware of herself as a woman, but it was of Jessie that she talked.

'I saw you talking to our Jessie just now,' said Bella.

'Oh aye?' said Jack.

Bella said, 'She often says more than she means you know, Jack.'

'No, Mrs. Seaton, I don't,' said Ford. 'I think she believes every word.'

'Aye,' said Bella, and for a moment gaiety left her. 'I do wish she wouldn't.'

*

Will Scrimgour was used to walking, and as he told his wife, walking was the only means he had to stop thinking about the Somme. Walking gave him an anonymity, he thought, made him like everybody else hurrying across the flagstones, but he was wrong Will Scrimgour's walk was unique, marking him as different from his fellows as surely as the nightmares of the Somme. His walking took him towards the park, sooty grass, bedraggled trees, and a cinder-covered square where boys played football with a ball of paper tied up tight with string – but not after they'd seen Scrimgour. Scrimgour was a marvel, a phenomenon, something to be watched, followed, even, if it were safe enough, jeered at.

He was walking parallel to the railings that enclosed the park, and one of the boys, braver than his fellows, picked up a stick that had done duty as a goalpost and ran past Scrimgour, rattling the railing as he went. At once, as if by reflex, Scrimgour dropped flat, looked warily about him then, after a moment, got up and marched on. The boy held the stick in both hands and dragged it across the railings again, making a machine gun clamour that terrified Scrimgour, sent him once more whimpering to the ground. He was, the boys decided, easy meat. They stood in a circle about him, laughing and jeering as Scrimgour lay whimpering.

But Scrimgour, terrified or not, had been trained to attack even when terrified. He sprang to his feet, shouting, and rushed at them. The boys scattered, but he grabbed the one with the

stick, wrenched it from him and lifted it high with a yell, still holding the boy as he did so.

*

Some of the guests were leaving. It had been a grand do, but even the grandest have to end some time and it must have cost poor old Bill a packet in booze. Tom stood by the door, nodding, waving, saying farewell, brick red again as the wedding jokes flowed for the last time. With him were Billy and Jack.

'Da says you were nearly late,' said Tom, but there was no accusation in his voice.

'You didn't even notice,' said Billy.

'No fear,' said Tom. 'I had better things to think about.'

He looked across at Mary, surrounded by a group of giggling girls: a queen amidst her ladies-in-waiting.

'Breaking up old Pinner's meeting, were you?' said Tom.

'He's a boss, Tom,' said Billy. 'Bosses all have to be broken up.'

'Is that right?' said Ford.

Billy looked at him suspiciously but as always, when he willed it so, Jack's face told him nothing.

'That's right,' said Billy.

'And if the bosses are broken,' said Ford, 'who takes over?'

'The people, Jack,' said Billy, 'the workers.'

'You and me and Tom here?' said Ford.

Billy said, 'Don't you think we'd do a better job?'

'I know I would,' said Ford. 'I'm not so sure about you two.'

Tom said, 'Me neither.' He could think of nothing but Mary.

'The Labour Party, Jack,' said Billy. 'They'll be the boss. We've even got a candidate putting up this time.'

Ford said, 'Against old Pinner?' and laughed. 'He hasn't a prayer.'

Billy said, 'Oh yes he has, Jack. Next time he might even win. Come and join us. What do you say?'

Ford said, 'You sound like the Sally Army.'

'Maybe,' said Billy, 'but with us heaven starts here and not up in the sky.'

As he spoke Matt Headley came in, went uneasily to Ford. He didn't have his best suit on, but he knew a few of the people present and had all the earmarks of a man who had arrived without an invitation. Typical of him, thought Ford, that he should look embarrassed, and typical that he should follow through with what he set out to do.

'I'm sorry to break in on you, Jack,' he said, 'but it's important.'

Billy Seaton said, 'I'll leave you to it then. Come on, Tom.'

His voice was angry, but Tom's eyes were still on Mary.

Billy turned back to say, 'Think over what we were talking about.' Then he and Tom were gone.

'What's up?' said Ford.

'Will Scrimgour,' said Headley.

Ford gestured impatiently. 'Oh not again,' he said.

'He's raving, Jack,' said Headley. 'Right doolally.'

'Back on the Somme?' said Ford.

'Aye,' said Headley. 'His missus sent for us. Will you come?'

Ford buttoned his tunic.

'Maybe I'd better,' he said. 'It'd take a uniform and three stripes to get through to him.'

Billy was with Jessie when Jack Ford and Matt Headley left. He looked at his sister, she was far from pleased.

'What's the time?' she asked.

Billy took his watch from his waistcoat. 'Six o'clock,' he said.

'Straight back to the pub,' said Jessie. 'They'll only miss five minutes if they hurry.'

But Billy remembered Matt Headley's words. 'His mate said it was important, Jessie,' he said.

'Yes,' said Jessie. 'With his kind pleasure always is.'

5

He had turned the bedroom into a battlefield and was barricaded behind the bed, chest of drawers and a pile of chairs. He still clutched the stick and walked restlessly up and down behind the barrier he had made like a man on sentry guard.

From the doorway his wife, Matt Headley and Ford looked at Scrimgour. Suddenly he began to sing very softly. The song he chose was ridiculous, and yet absolutely right, thought Ford, for his state of mind, the place where he thought he was.

'We are Fred Karno's army,' sang Scrimgour.

'What earthly good are we?'

'We cannot fight, we cannot march, the ragtime infantry.'

Mrs. Scrimgour said, 'I can't get him out you see, Mr. Ford. I don't think he knows who I am any more.'

'I'd better try then,' said Ford.

Lucy Scrimgour put her hand on his arm as he moved.

'He's got a stick,' she said. And then: 'There's blood on it.' Her hands went up to cover her face and Matt Headley did his clumsy best to comfort her once more.

Ford said, 'Get her out, Matt,' and Headley led Mrs. Scrimgour away. Jack Ford took a deep breath and pulled down his tunic and then marched towards the barricade with a sergeant's strut.

'Scrimgour!' he bawled. 'Where the hell are you, man? Scrimgour!'

The singing stopped and Scrimgour looked warily out and said, 'Yes, sarge?'

'Oh there you are,' said Ford. 'Get out of that trench, man.'

'What about Fritz, sergeant?' said Scrimgour.

Ford said, We've been replaced, man. Let the West Kents worry about Fritz. We've been ordered down the line.'

Scrimgour said, 'Nobody told me, sergeant.'

Ford snorted impatiently.

'Aren't I telling you? Come on, you daft bugger. Don't you want Blighty leave? Don't you want to go home?'

Scrimgour made no move.

'All right,' said Ford 'Suit yourself. I can't keep the whole company waiting just for you. You can bloody stay there.' He turned away and Scrimgour, still clutching his stick, emerged from behind his barricade. Easily, careful not to hurry, Ford turned to face him.

'Oh there you are,' he said. 'And a hell of a mess you are too.'

Suddenly his voice became once more a sergeant's bawl.

'Attention!'

At once Scrimgour crashed to attention, the stick by his side like a rifle.

I'd better play this carefully, Ford thought to himself. That's a hell of a big stick he's got from somewhere, then aloud: 'Stand at ease! Attention!'

Will Scrimgour obeyed each command as it came.

'That's better,' said Ford, and thought that maybe he might get away with it, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. Instantly Scrimgour stiffened, the stick in his hand once more like a club. Ford swore softly under his breath.

Will Scrimgour said, 'That's Fritz, sergeant.'

Ford said, 'How many times do I have to tell you? It's the West Kents ... Attention!'

Scrimgour made no effort to move.

'No, sergeant,' he said.

Jack Ford moved in on him with his sergeant's strut. 'Say that again, Private Scrimgour,' he said, 'and I will have you shot.' He paused for a moment then, 'Attention!' There was

a slight, barely perceptible hesitation then Scrimgour went to attention.

'That's better,' said Ford. 'Slope arms! Present arms! Slope arms! Order arms!'

Scrimgour obeyed each command and obeyed it efficiently and well. Ford remembered what a good soldier Will Scrimgour had been. At last Ford took a deep breath and gave the order he'd been building up to. 'Ground arms!' he said.

Will Scrimgour, in the correct military fashion laid his stick on the floor and Ford let out his breath with a sigh of relief. Behind him a voice spoke.

'Thank you, sergeant,' it said. 'We'll take him now.'

Ford turned and found himself looking at two policemen. They went past Ford and advanced on Scrimgour: one of them was wearing the ribbon of the Military Medal

Not unkindly one of the policemen said, 'You'd better come with us, son.'

Scrimgour looked at Ford. 'Do I have to, sergeant?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Ford. 'You go with them, Will. They'll fix you up with Blighty leave.' They led Scrimgour away and Ford felt like Judas.

•

Even then the job wasn't finished; there was still Lucy Scrimgour to cope with. At the moment the facts of what her husband had done hadn't really sunk in. Street neighbours had made complaints. Policemen had come to her house, and facts had been stated, but they were facts impossible to believe. When she did believe them she would weep, but that time had not yet come. Better to keep her busy, thought Ford, give her hands something to do, and together she and Matt Headley and Ford began to dismantle the barricade, to put the bedroom to rights.

'They said he—hit a bairn,' said Lucy Scrimgour. 'With that stick. Will never hit a bairn in his life. If our Fred was doing

wrong it was always me had to hit him.' Ford watched Matt Headley heave the chest of drawers back into position.

'Where's your Fred now, Mrs. Scrimgour?' he asked.

'At me mother's. He'll be all right,' she said.

There was a knock at the door and Ford gestured with his head.

Matt Headley went out. Lucy Scrimgour said, 'Will wouldn't do any of that in his right mind. You know that.'

'I know,' said Ford.

'Will you tell them so?' she asked.

'Of course,' said Ford as Matt Headley came back in.

'It's that copper, Jack,' he said.

Ford turned to face the policeman with the Military Medal ribbon.

'Mrs. Scrimgour,' the policeman began, but she interrupted him at once.

'How is he?' she asked.

'The doctor's given him something,' the policeman said. 'He's quiet for now.' Then, as if ashamed of what he had to say, 'He'll be charged in the morning.'

'Charged?' said Ford. 'But he's—' He broke off. There were things best left unsaid.

But Lucy Scrimgour could say them.

'Go ahead and say it, Mr. Ford, he's a madman.'

'That's for the court,' said the policeman. 'If you want to send him a change of clothes I could take them for him.'

'When can I see him?' she asked.

Gently the policeman said, 'Better wait till tomorrow.'

Lucy Scrimgour said, 'I'll get his best suit. I've just been having it pressed.' She went out quickly; for some reason the fact that her husband's suit had been pressed had caused the tears to flow.

'He can't be charged,' said Ford. 'He's raving.'

The policeman said, 'That's not for me to say, sergeant.'

Ford looked at the medal ribbon. 'You were in it, you got the Military Medal.'

'Same regiment as you,' said the policeman. 'The Third battalion.'

'Well then,' said Ford. 'You know he's raving, and you know why.'

The policeman said, 'That's up to the court.'

'Who'll he get?' said Ford.

'Pinner,' the policeman said.

Ford looked relieved. 'He was in it, wasn't he?'

'Aye,' said the policeman. 'Nearly two years. Gassed at Wipers.'

'He'll know about it,' said Ford.

The policeman said, 'Scrimgour got a medal an'all didn't he?'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'The D.C.M.'

'Pinner didn't,' said the policeman. 'He reckons he deserved one.'

■

In the Seaton kitchen Jack Ford sat more at home than ever, cap off, tunic off, polishing the brasses of tunic and cap. By the fireside Bella fussed with a smoke-blackened pan that bubbled gently on the hob.

'You'll stay and have a bit of dinner with us? It's just broth and dumplings, but you're very welcome.'

Ford said, 'I'd only be in your way, Mrs. Seaton.'

'Don't talk daft,' said Bella. 'Billy's down-by and Billy's away back to his college. There's only Jessie and me at dinner. We could do with a man's company.'

'All right then,' said Ford. 'Thanks.' His hands were still busy with button-stick and polishing rags when the door opened and Jessie came in. Her eyes went at once to Ford.

'Hullo, Jessie,' he said.

'Hullo.'

Ford said, 'I ran out of Mepo. Your mam lent me hers.'

He went on polishing.

'Going somewhere smart?' said Jessie.

'Magistrates' Court,' said Ford, then laughed at the dismay in her face. 'No, bonny lass. Not me. Will Scrimgour.'

'I heard he—he—' somehow Jessie couldn't bring herself to say it.

'He belted a little lad,' said Ford. 'Broke his skull and four ribs. And I'm going to speak for him.'

'You're never!' said Bella. 'Not if he did that to a bairn.'

'He's mad, Mrs. Seaton,' Ford said. 'Mad in the service of his country ... Some gave their lives and some gave their sight, their arms, their legs ... Will gave his senses'

'But all the same,' said Bella, 'hurting a bairn like that—'

There was no point in being angry with her. She would never quite understand what had happened: anybody who hadn't been to France would never quite understand.

Gently Ford said, 'Will never hurt a bairn in his life, Mrs. Seaton. He was hurting a German.'

6

The Magistrates' Court was fairly full that day: blokes out of a job, women with nothing to do, looking about them with an indifferent air like spectators at a music-hall where the acts so far haven't been much good, but there's expectation of better to follow: journalists bored as always because they'd seen it all before; and, the only intent ones, the friends and relatives of the accused, intent because they were the only ones among the spectators who had hardship from what followed, perhaps even suffering. Among these last were Matt Headley and Mrs. Scrimgour. He did his best to comfort her, but it was a very clumsy best.

Pinner was sitting as chairman of the court, flanked on either side by another magistrate, a couple of ciphers who would take their instructions only from the borough's M.P. From their demeanour it was apparent that they had no doubts that Pinner would be returned. Facing them sat the prosecuting solicitor, pompous and balding, and Scrimgour's solicitor, a young man, socially dedicated, and clever in his way, but one who had not yet learned the in-fighting that even his pompous opponent took for granted. The clerk of the court cleared his throat.

'Put up William Scrimgour,' he said.

Scrimgour appeared in the dock, wearing his best suit, and guarded by a policeman who looked, Matt Headley thought, as if he could shake poor Will into pieces with one hand. Still, at least he was quiet.

The clerk of the court read out the charge. 'William Scrimgour, you are charged that on the ninth day of July 1919, you

did assault and beat John William Francis, a minor, occasioning actual bodily harm. How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?'

The young solicitor rose from his seat and said, 'Not guilty, your honour.'

The uncommitted spectators settled down to watch something they knew instinctively was going to be better than the procession of drunks and petty thieves they had seen so far. Packets of nuts and sweets passed surreptitiously from hand to hand, and the whole sad, sorry business got under way.

The police doctor was as pompous, though not nearly as bald, as the prosecuting solicitor. From the very start it was obvious that he had no doubt of Will Scrimgour's guilt, and what ought to be done to him.

'The damage to the child was extensive,' he said. 'Severe concussion and three broken ribs.'

'Could this damage have been done by hands or fists, say?' said the prosecuting solicitor.

The police doctor was adamant. 'Not possibly,' he said. 'These wounds were inflicted by a heavy implement.'

'A club for example?'

Scrimgour's solicitor rose. 'That is a leading question, your honour,' he said. The prosecuting solicitor looked at him equably, and did not wait for Pinner's ruling. 'I will rephrase the question,' he said. 'What kind of implement, doctor?' The police doctor glared at Scrimgour's solicitor.

'A club. Undoubtedly,' he said.

The prosecuting solicitor reached forward to the table and picked up Will Scrimgour's stick. 'One like this?' he asked.

The police doctor said, 'Exactly like that. A brutal weapon to use on a child.'

Will Scrimgour's solicitor did the best he could, but his inexperience was no match for the police doctor's savage dislike of his client.

'Would you say that my client gave way to rage?' he asked.

'Quite ungovernable rage,' said the police doctor.

'Amounting to madness?'

'That is not my experience,' the police doctor said.

'But you did say ungovernable,' said the young solicitor.

The police doctor said, 'It should have been controlled. It could have been controlled. If it had been, a child would not now be lying ill.'

The young solicitor turned to Pinner and his ciphers. 'Your worships,' he said, 'I must ask you to ask the witness to refrain from such comments.'

But Pinner's mind too appeared to be made up.

'I see nothing improper in Dr. Laing's remarks,' he said. 'You may continue.'

'Did you examine Mr. Scrimgour?' the young solicitor asked.

The police doctor said, 'I did.'

'What did he complain of?'

The police doctor made a gesture almost of impatience, as if these questions were just so much time wasted before sentence was passed. 'Headaches,' he said, 'nervous debility, depression.'

'And did he have these things?'

'In some degree,' said Dr. Laing. 'Lots of people do.'

Scrimgour's solicitor said, 'And did he complain of nightmares about the war?'

'He did.'

'Nightmares in which he was buried alive?'

'Yes.'

'And had he in fact been buried alive?' the young solicitor asked. Immediately the prosecuting solicitor was on his feet.

'Your honour,' he said, 'this witness can have no first-hand knowledge of the question.'

Scrimgour's solicitor surrendered. 'Would you say this man is responsible for his actions?' he asked.

Dr. Laing was contemptuous. 'Of course he is,' he said.

Matt Headley didn't know much about the law, but he knew enough to know that poor Will was taking a beating. From the way Lucy Scrimgour sat rigid, fists clenched, never

taking her eyes from her husband, it was obvious that she knew it too. And poor Will just sat there, and whether he took in any of it or not who could say? Maybe he's still on the Somme, thought Matt, and he can't hear the voices for the roar of the guns. He didn't even look up when Jack Ford was called and sworn ... Will Scrimgour's solicitor questioned Ford with relief. This time there was no sign of antagonism.

'My client was buried alive?' he said again.

Jack Ford said, 'I helped to dig him out.'

'And how long had he served by then?'

'From the very beginning,' said Ford.

Scrimgour's solicitor asked, 'Did he see much fighting?'

Jack Ford's smile was bitter. 'He had his share—' he said, 'and a bit more.'

'He won a medal, I believe?' Scrimgour's solicitor asked.

At once Pinner looked up from the notes in front of him and regarded Scrimgour as if he saw him for the very first time.

'Yes,' said Ford, and thought, keep off medals, you daft bugger. But Will Scrimgour's solicitor's talents did not include telepathy.

'What was it for?' he asked.

'Rescuing a comrade under fire,' said Ford.

'And what was the medal?'

Ford said, 'The D.C.M.'

And the silly sod made a meal of it.

'The Distinguished Conduct Medal?' the young solicitor said. 'Apart from the Victoria Cross, is that not the highest award for gallantry this man could have received?'

Again Ford was aware of Pinner staring at Will. There was no admiration in that stare.

'Yes, sir,' said Ford, 'it is.'

The young solicitor thanked him and sat. It was the turn of the prosecution now.

'You saw many men under extreme stress?'

'Yes, sir,' said Ford.

'Did they all behave like Scrimgour?' the prosecuting solicitor asked.

Ford shrugged. 'Some did. Some didn't.'

'How many did, Sergeant Ford?' the prosecuting solicitor asked. 'One in a hundred, five, ten?'

'He was the only one I saw buried alive,' said Ford. The prosecuting solicitor said, 'The only one?'

Jack Ford said, 'The only one who survived it.'

■

In the Seaton kitchen Jessie sat alone marking books. The day was fine, the seashore near, but there were always some books to be marked She heard the clash of boots in the concreted yard and Ford's voice called out, 'Anybody in?'

'Come in, Jack,' she said and thought instantly of Will Scrimgour as Jack entered. 'Well?' she said.

'Committed for trial and remanded in custody,' said Ford.

She put down the exercise book she was holding 'It's not possible,' she said.

Ford shrugged. 'It happened.'

'But didn't you tell them about Mr. Scrimgour?' said Jessie. 'What he's been through.'

'Aye,' said Jack, 'I told them.'

'Well then,' said Jessie, and Ford found himself smiling at her. To her the injustice had failed to be righted and therefore somebody must have bungled the job. He went over to her, put his arm round her shoulders, bent so that his eyes looked into hers.

'You and me, pet, we're ignorant,' he said. 'We don't understand people like Will. He's not mad, he's—what's the word? Oh, aye—self-indulgent. Do you know what that means?'

'His own pleasure is his main concern,' she said.

'I thought it did,' said Ford. 'Will's got a bad temper, you see. If anyone crosses him—he just lets rip. Mind you he *should* control himself, only he won't. He prefers to lose his temper Self-indulgent.'

She looked back at him, incredulous. 'The magistrates said that?' she said.

'Pinner did.'

'But he was in the war too,' said Jessie. 'He must know what it's like.'

'I've had officers like him before,' said Ford.

'Captain Manners?' she asked.

'Manners? No. He was all right. But they weren't all like Manners.' His voice became a savage mimicry of a public school-educated officer's. '"Pull yourself together, man. This isn't a damned picnic, you know. What if you have had a leg blown off, you can still hop, can't you?"'

'I never knew,' she said.

'What didn't you know?'

'That men could be so cruel.'

'Didn't you?' said Ford. 'Maybe you shouldn't let us out to play on our own.'

'Pinner wants shooting,' she said.

Ford smiled at her. 'Now who's cruel? Want me to do it?'

'I wish I could do it meself,' she said, and he thought, by God, she means it.

'I wish I could see it,' he said. 'Think you'd make him cry, do you?'

'I know I would.'

'You're wrong,' he said. 'He's got guts, Jessie ... his trouble is—'

She interrupted him. 'There's no need to be vulgar, Jack Ford.'

But Ford went on unheedingly. 'He never got a medal.'

'What?' she said, bewildered.

'He never got a medal,' he said again as if that explained everything.

'What's that got to say to anything?' she asked, but he was brooding in thought.

'Shurrup a minute,' he said.

His face told her nothing, and yet she was quite sure that

his brain was racing. At last the brooding was over.

'Jessie,' he said, 'you're marvellous,' and kissed her, and as he did so Bella Seaton entered carrying a jug of beer, in silence watched Ford and Jessie embrace and in silence went out again.

'I've got to go, bonny lass,' said Ford.

'Now?' she said, her arms still about him.

'Aye,' he said. 'Now. When's the votes counted?'

'Tomorrow,' she said.

'And what time is the result out?' he asked.

'You can't tell,' she said.

'When's it usually?' he asked. There was impatience in his voice.

'Honestly, Jack,' she said, 'I just don't know. Nobody does.'

'Never mind,' said Ford. 'I'll think of something.'

Gently he disengaged himself from her, put on his cap and turned to leave. 'Where are you going?' she asked. He kissed her again.

'To fettle old Pinner,' he said, and left.

No explanations, she thought, and no apologies. Just like that chap she'd read about in the history course. Never apologise, never explain. Jack Ford marches off into action, and leaves the little woman at home. Given time, something would have to be done about that. From outside she could hear his voice and the mockery in it. 'You don't want to stand about in the backyard, Mrs. Seaton,' he said. 'You'll catch your death.'

•

The planning was done in the 'Bluebell', and it wouldn't be the first time that good staff work had been done in a pub. What puzzled him was why he was doing staff work at all. Pinner's success or failure in life means nothing to me, Ford thought, no more than Scrimgour's does. He was a mate, all right, and a good mate in his day, but that day is over. Nowadays Will Scrimgour is nothing but a bloody pest. And yet the

staff work was going through. Jessie Seaton's influence was giving him a conscience, and that would never do. He looked at the list of names in front of him, and said to Matt Headley, 'Are you sure you can't think of any more?'

Matt Headley said, 'No, Jack. That's all there are.'

If Matt Headley said that was it, then that was it. That was the kind of chap he'd always been; solid, reliable, conscientious, the ideal corporal. Carefully Ford tore the list in two and handed half of it to Headley.

'Right,' he said, 'that's your half.'

But solid conscientiousness is not the same thing as creative action.

'Suppose they won't come?' said Matt.

Ford sighed his impatience.

'Tell them about Will,' he said. '*Make* them come.'

'Yes but, Jack,' Matt Headley said, 'some of them might have to stop off work.'

Jack Ford said, 'He was your marrer, Matt. Since before the war. Remember?'

Matt gulped at his beer. 'All right,' he said at last.

'We'll meet here,' said Ford. 'If the pub's shut we'll go to that tearoom down the street. Francy Milburn's working in the town hall now. He'll let us know when they're coming, all right?'

Matt Headley grinned at him. 'For a minute I was back in the Battalion. You were always the boss, Jack.'

'Old Pinner's got to pay,' said Ford.

'This'll make him pay all right,' said Matt.

'Hurt him more than lifting his wallet, this will,' said Ford. 'Off you go.'

Matt Headley stood up and came to attention.

'Yes, sergeant,' he said.

Ford said lazily, 'And less of your lip an'all.'

They had got thirty-two men in all from Gallowshield and the surrounding district, and all in their own regiment. They should have been more, but some were too ill to travel, some

had already died of wounds. Still thirty-two wasn't bad. Enough to make a gesture, and a bloody rude gesture at that, and Pinner would be on the receiving end. He wouldn't like it, wouldn't like it at all, particularly if the press were about, and they would be remembering that he had just been made an M.P.

Ford looked at his command. They looked different out of uniform, more relaxed and yet somehow more vulnerable. The work was there all right—most of them would lose half a day's pay because of this little jaunt—but how long would it be like that? How long would there be the money for such luxuries as a pint while you waited and a chance to avenge an old mate who'd had his brains blown loose and thank God it didn't happen to me. Around him the talk was all of the war, old battles refought, old horrors remembered. The war and the horror of war and a rare respect for its victims. Not a man had refused to turn out in support of Will Scrimgour. Not one man. And some of them hadn't even known him. Unobtrusively Ford moved among them: they were neat, tidy, well scrubbed, ready for parade; and every one of them had polished his medals till they gleamed. They weren't drinking too much either, which was a relief. He didn't even have to ask them to lay off the booze; every man was determined that this should be done rightly, even with style.

Just before closing time Francy Milburn came into the pub and fought his way through to Jack.

'They'll be coming out in a minute,' he said and dashed back to the town hall.

'Thanks, Francy,' said Jack. Then his voice became the same effortless sergeant's bellow.

'All right,' he roared, 'see your drinks off. It's time to go.'

They moved in small groups from the pub to the town hall. Quite a sight, Gallowshield town hall, erected at the height of Victorian opulence. A copy of an Italian palazzo no less, with only the pit wheels and the shipyard cranes to match it for height if not for beauty. In its forecourt stood a statue of

Queen Victoria, the Queen Empress, small, dumpy and yet very obviously the ruler of nations. Above her was a balcony and below it a crowd of several hundreds, a well-behaved yet noisy crowd, out for the same kind of treat as the spectators in court. Half-a-dozen policemen kept a benevolent eye on them, among them the one with the Military Medal who had arrested Will Scrimgour. He still wore his Military Medal. A small group of men filed out on to the balcony as the men from the 'Bluebell' mingled with the crowd, eased their way to the front. The small group consisted of the three parliamentary candidates—Conservative, Liberal and Labour—and the mayor who was acting as returning officer. The crowd buzzed more noisily than ever, so that the mayor's opening words were lost, and he called out the actual figures of the voting in a high shrill voice like a scream of protest.

'George Anthony Burne, Labour,' he screamed, '7,186.'

There were boos at this but there was applause too.

'Reginald Harley Davidson, Conservative, 9,567.' More boos and more applause.

Then finally, 'Reginald Leslie Pinner, Liberal, 10,853,' a yell of triumph at this—Gallowshield was traditionally a Liberal seat, but still there were boos too.

In the front of the crowd Jack Ford turned to Matt Headley. 'By God that was close,' he said.

But Matt Headley had never been one for nuances.

'He got in, didn't he?' he said.

'Just,' said Ford and thought, maybe Billy's not so daft after all.

As they spoke the mayor screamed that the aforesaid Reginald Leslie Pinner was elected, and Pinner stepped forward to take his bow. His speech was both short and predictable. 'I thank you one and all,' he said. 'It was a fair fight. Now let's make this a land fit for heroes.' Ford said softly, 'and idiots,' as Jessie ran up and asked, 'Who got in?'

'Pinner,' said Ford, 'just. Labour Party topped 7,000.'

But there was no time to listen to Jessie's raptures. Francy

Milburn came out of the town hall and up to Ford.

'On his way out now, Jack,' he said.

From where Ford stood he could see the flight of steps leading out of the town hall and beyond it a cleared space that would allow Pinner passage to his waiting Daimler. Jessie pressed forward.

'Out of the way, bonny lass,' said Ford.

'But I want to see,' said Jessie.

'You heard me,' said Ford.

Still not apologising, still not explaining, she thought. There'd have to be some changes all right, but this wasn't the time.

'All right, Jack,' she said and moved into the crowd.

Ford said to Matt Headley, 'That's a sight you'll never see again—her doing what she's told.'

He stepped into the cleared space, Matt Headley with him, and once again his voice was a sergeant's, cutting into the noise of the crowd with effortless ease.

'All right,' he said. 'Let's have you. Two ranks facing inwards. Move yourselves.' At once his command went into action. Sixteen a side they lined the path from the cleared space to Pinner's car and Jack Ford strutted between the ranks eyeing them as only a sergeant can.

'Space yourselves out then,' he yelled, 'shoulders back.'

They obeyed him and Matt Headley took up position at the foot of the right-hand rank. The men did Ford proud. No guard of honour had ever stood at more rigid attention. The crowd watched quite happily, accepting this as a bonus; taking it as no more than an extra piece of flattery to Pinner because he'd won. From the town hall there emerged a group of pressmen, some with cameras. They took one look at the guard of honour and moved to its head. They had no idea what it was about but it was unusual, unexpected, and might well be news.

Then Pinner appeared, bowler-hatted, wearing a dark suit that had perhaps cost as much as the clothes of all the guard of honour put together. Behind Pinner came his supporters,

all wearing rosettes, but none of them wore medals.

Pinner hesitated when he saw the two files of men awaiting him but he saw no reason to avoid them. They were soldiers after all and as he'd said in his address, he was a soldier talking to soldiers. Perhaps this was their way of saying thank you. He came down the steps and at once Ford's bellow sounded out again: 'Squad -attention.' Thirty-two feet came down as one. Pinner continued to walk down the steps, and Ford strutted up to meet him at the foot.

'Beg pardon, sir,' he said.

'Well?' said Pinner.

'We heard you were in the army,' said Ford.

Pinner smiled indulgently. He'd been right after all. A little spontaneous surprise like this would do his parliamentary career no harm.

'Yes, sergeant,' he said, 'I was.'

Ford's voice changed, becoming a parody of cringing servility.

'Only you didn't get a medal,' he said. 'Not like us lucky buggers. Well—you can have mine—and Will Scrimgour's' Will Scrimgour's was held in his hand and he threw it at Pinner's feet, then he plucked his own from the breast of his tunic and hurled them down too.

Pinner flinched as if Ford had struck him, then marched between the two ranks of waiting men, running the gauntlet of their contempt. As he passed each pair of men they threw their medals at his feet. The crowd buzzed and the press were having the time of their lives. Pinner walked faster and faster until at last, Matt Headley's medals in front of him, he reached his car. The policeman with the Military Medal opened the car door, as the chauffeur tugged at the starting handle. The engine fired.

'Well, constable,' said Pinner, 'aren't you going to do anything about it?'

The policeman said, 'No harm in being given a medal, sir,' and reached to the left breast of his tunic, threw the medal at

Pinner's feet. Pinner, scarlet, furious, got into the car and left, as Jack Ford moved back to the head of the squad.

'We showed him, eh, Jack?' Matt Headley said.

But Ford was remembering the squeal of the mayor's voice as he announced the results.

'Aye maybe,' said Ford, 'but he's still our Member of Parliament.'

But Matt's thoughts were all of celebration. 'Coming for a drink?' he asked.

Ford fingered the few coins in his pocket, the last of his pay, the last of his savings. It would be the shipyards for him on Monday, but there was enough left for one more drink. He said, 'I'll just walk me girl home first,' then used his sergeant's roar for the last time: 'Squad—left and right turn. By the right quick march.' The men marched off and on the cleared pathway their medals lay gleaming.

Fish in Woolly Jumpers

7

The North Eastern Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Co. Ltd. received Jack Ford as it received every other of its workers into its capacious maw; it took them because it needed their nourishment. The boom time was still on and men laboured to replace the millions of tons of shipping destroyed in World War One, Jack Ford among them. He took with him a certain measure of fame; his action outside the town hall had been widely publicised, and to the men about him he was a hero. He'd tackled a boss, and reduced him in the sight of his fellows Jack Ford had moved on from the young journeyman just out of his time who had marched away with the Territorials in 1914, now he was a hero, a man to be treated with respect, a man—in the last resort—to be consulted. Upstairs in the teak-lined offices too his name was noted and remembered. He had struck a blow against wealth, and therefore, presumably, against capitalism; such things are not easily forgotten. But at the moment the boom was on, and the yard needed every man it could get. The North Eastern Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Co. Ltd. paid Jack Ford by the week, kept its eye on him and remembered.

He spent most of his time in the machine shop working at a lathe, his hands neat and skilful. It was demanding work, precision work, but once the work had found its rhythm there was plenty of opportunity for thought ... not even the North Eastern Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Co. Ltd. could get inside his head ... he thought about his girl, over and over he thought about his girl. So far she had shied away from an official engagement. Wise Jessie. There was money

coming in all right, regular money; enough for beer when the day's work was done, whisky at weekends, the occasional packet of Gold Flake to relieve the monotony of Woodbines. Money for treats for his girl too, pictures, music-hall ... between them they were pulling in enough money to get married, but she said wait, and if you applied her standards to life then she was right. He was on a week's notice, and he had his reputation. She had Billy to worry about, and the expenses of a university education. Billy seemed to eat up books the way lesser men devoured fish and chips. So, wait, she said, until we know the boom is going to last, until Billy has a little less time to go at University, and then we'll marry. In the meantime she wouldn't even consider getting engaged. It wasn't fair to him, she said. Suppose he met another girl. He'd met dozens, but never one like her. The countess, for instance. He could remember her name all right: Varvara Lubova, her elegance, her sense of style, but she wasn't Jessie. The fire was missing; the absolute certainty that wrong must be righted, that truth must be told. He remembered her maid too though he could never recall *her* name –Maria was it? Irena? in some ways she had pleased him more than the countess; she was simpler, poor, in many ways more like himself; accepting the needs and demands of the kind of man who was not, who could never be, a gentleman: but with her too the fire was missing; that utter directness that transformed her from a plain girl to a lovely and desirable one.

And yet, he thought, how can this be what I love, what I desire? My interest in life is Jack Ford, and the advancement of his career. No knight Jack Ford, no shining armour to put on before he went galloping away to rescue the widows and orphans. In his scheme of things there was only one orphan: his name was Jack Ford. He looked up from his work impatient with his own indecisiveness and at once the chargehand was on him. 'Keep your head down, Ford.' Humbly Ford lowered his head because he needed the money and reserved his blasphemies for inside his skull. One day, he thought, one

day. It was becoming less and less likely that that day would dawn. So long as the work lasted he was a fitter, no more no less, better off than a labourer, true, but with no chance of becoming a charge-hand, much less a foreman, not with his reputation. And if the work lasted and he and Jessie married, it would be his wages they'd have to live on once the kids started coming. He liked it that way, preferred it even; it was a man's business to provide, just as it was a woman's business to run a home and do what she was told. Jack Ford was a traditionalist in such matters. It was Jessie who suggested to him that there were other ways of living, ways of sharing companionship; ideas he respected the more because of their very attraction. Life would be pleasant like that, he knew, but there could only be one boss, and his name was Jack Ford . . .

1920 slipped by and they were into 1921, and still no engagement ring, still no other woman. Then Mary had a baby. It was a boy and they called him Tommy. Then Mary had something else too, a cough. A persistent, dry, racking cough and pains in her chest and back. Then her cup was full and running over as the Revivalists said. The mine owners ordained a wage cut and the miners went on strike.

The men in the shipyards watched and waited. It would be their turn next. Jack Ford was one of the first to go as the recession struck. He and a group of militants he despised were declared redundant. There were lay-offs and part-time work and then a wage cut for shipyard workers too. The men refused to work and called it a lock-out; the North Eastern Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Co. Ltd. declared it a strike.

At first it was bearable. The miners, ever anxious to be first in the battle line, thought Ford, had struck in February, and when their free coal gave out they shivered and picked over the slag heaps in search of what coal there was for warmth, for hot water, for cooking—if they had anything to cook. The shipyard men hadn't gone out till April when the weather was warmer. They'd read the signs right too and saved their pay, so that at first it wasn't too bad; a bit of

money in their pockets, leisure to walk and talk with your girl, but as time went by and the money ran out it got worse—and worse. First the luxuries went, booze, tobacco; and then the very necessities were in danger. He had just about enough money left to pay for the room he rented every week, there wasn't much left over to give to the woman who looked after him to buy food. He lost weight and for a while felt fitter for it, but in the end he would grow weaker and he knew it; knew too that even if the yards did start up again he would be among the last to get a job.

Not that he was as badly off as some: it was the family men who took the biggest beating. Miners and shipyard workers alike found it difficult, almost impossible, to provide for wives and bairns. Hunger was with them always; not starvation, not yet: just the nagging realisation that the belly was never really full, the body always unsatisfied. There were soup kitchens, it was true, but a grown man didn't go to soup kitchens. They were for the bairns, the widows, the old people who had absolutely nothing coming in. For a grown man soup kitchens were a place of charity and it hadn't come to charity yet. For Ford it never would, and yet food and the need of food obsessed his thoughts more and more. He couldn't, and wouldn't live off Jessie, and besides she had her hands full as it was without him: now she was the sole supporter of her family and obstinately determined that Billy should stay on at University.

He took a walk—a daft thing to do because walking only gave you an appetite you couldn't fill, but he couldn't stand it in the silence of his room; he needed space and air: he had to have them. The walk took him to the seashore. The day was clear, dry, the sea a luminous, silken grey flecked with white caps; an easy moving sea with no threat in it, not yet. He slogged down the road that cut between sand dunes on the one hand and meadows on the other. Dotted across the meadowland were sheep and lambs, hundreds of them. Ford slogged on at a soldier's pace down the road. It wasn't fair, it

wasn't bloody fair. Here was food, tons of it, eating its head off in the lush green grass, and here was Ford half starved, hard put to remember when he had had as much as a slice of corned beef Food in the sea too, and without a bit of fishing he'd have been even hungrier than he was. He slogged up to the top of the hill and looked, first at the grazing sheep, then at the sea. The sea too was a giver of life, but the sea could take as well as give. All his life Ford had lived on that sea coast: he knew how terrible that sea could be in its anger, how swiftly it could demolish, take away, absorb. Absorb, he thought: that was the key to the whole thing, because what the sea took for its own it was reluctant to give back, and it was impossible to reclaim.

He set off again, more slowly, his mind racing: the sheep, the sea and the war, that was the answer to the whole problem. An observant man, Ford, all the time, and one who accumulated skills that applied not just to one situation but to many. Trench raids ... that was it. But could he remember who had been best at trench raids?

In his mind he was no longer at the seashore but in France five years before. It was night and he was creeping along across No Man's Land beside Manners. Ideally there was a moon but it was almost totally obscured by clouds, giving them just enough light to find their way from shell-hole to shell-hole. Behind them, equally silent, were two or three privates of his regiment, armed with a weird assortment of weapons: hunting knives, clubs, revolvers, Mills bombs: their objective perhaps a prisoner, perhaps just to create havoc when they bombed an enemy trench, then back as silently as they had come, using the sparse moonlight, and the weird, moon-crater landscape of No Man's Land to get them back to safety. Manners had been a hunter before the war: stag in Scotland, bigger game in India and Africa, and he had taught Ford a lot, things that Ford remembered in meticulous detail. That side of it was all right. He tried to remember the men who had followed him as they moved up to the German trenches. Matt Headley,

always Matt Headley, silent and dangerous despite his bulk. But the others? Who were the best of the others? As he visualised the trench raids the names came back: Paddy Boyle and Charlie Stobbs. They'd made a damn good team. Manners was dead now but Jack Ford knew himself to be perfectly capable of taking Manners' place as leader; besides Captain Manners would never have approved the operation that Ford had in mind. His walk was more leisurely and almost a stroll. He hardly noticed the farmer who was approaching him, a big beefy man in tweeds, shotgun under his arm, spaniel at his heels, but the farmer noticed him and shied away instinctively, fearing that the shabby man approaching him would begin to beg. Jack Ford's thoughts were far removed from begging.

Shortly after that things began to be better for Jack Ford, Matt Headley, Paddy Boyle and Charlie Stobbs. To begin with neither they nor their families felt hunger any more: they had money in their pockets too, the price of a pint or a packet of Woodbines, and their more destitute neighbours also began to eat more nourishing food. An observer, if there had been an observer, would have noticed that their incomes increased with the dark of the moon, but observer there was none.

■

Ford sat in the Seatons' kitchen, waiting for Jessie. His coat was off, and he was singing to a six-month-old baby boy, Tom and Mary's son Tommy that he handled somewhat inexpertly on his knee.

'She's a big lass and a bonny lass and she likes her beer And they call her Cushie Butterfield and I wish she were here' may not be the best song to sing to a child, but he'd forgotten all the lullabies, the other songs he knew were even less appropriate. Young Tommy seemed to like it any way. He gurgled and grinned toothlessly at Ford as Bella Seaton came in carrying two glasses.

'You'll stay and have one, Jack,' she said.

'You shouldn't have bothered, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford. 'I brought them for you.'

He waved to a row of bottles on the table.

'Surely you'll be glad of a drink?' said Bella. 'A hot day like this—'

'I've had me share,' said Ford. 'Don't worry. Anyway, you know what your Jessie's like—'

He looked at Bella, already worried. She knew only too well what Jessie was like.

'Aye, Jack,' said Bella, 'I do.' Then nervously, 'If you don't mind I'll just shift these bottles - I like to keep the place tidy.'

Ford grinned as Bella shifted the bottles to a cupboard, all but one, which she opened once the others were hidden, then filled a glass and sat down and sighed comfortably, took a sip of the beer. They sat for a while in a companionable silence. Then Ford began to sing again to the child:

> She's a big lass and a bonny lass
> and she likes her beer . . .'

Canny lad, Bella Seaton thought. A real canny lad. There was a step outside in the yard and Bella at once put down her glass as the door opened and Jessie came in. Ford at once stopped singing. 'Hullo pet,' he said, and still carrying Tommy, went over to her, but she ignored him and turned to her mother instead.

'Have you two swopped jobs then?' she asked. Bella looked bewildered. 'You do the drinking while he looks after the bairn. Is that it?'

Bella looked hopefully at Jack Ford. If anybody could get her out of this one it was Jack.

Ford said, 'No, it's not.' He handed the baby to Bella, picked up the glass of beer and drank.

'That's my beer,' he said.

'Oh it is, is it?' said Jessie. 'And what makes you think I'm going out with you when you're drinking?'

'Drinking?' said Ford. 'One glass of beer?'

'Drink's drink, Jack Ford,' said Jessie. 'So don't try coming the clever with me.'

Ford said, 'I wouldn't dare.' Taking his time, he took another pull at the beer and then put the glass on the table. 'Now,' he said, 'how about that walk?'

'You haven't finished your beer,' said Jessie.

'You mean you're going to let me?'

'Sooner you than me mother,' said Jessie.

Bella was indignant. 'Jessie,' she said, 'how you can stand there and say such things . . .'

But Jessie was in no mood for indignation no matter how righteous.

'Now you listen to me, mother,' she said. 'I'm not going to tell you again. The only money that comes into this house is mine and I'm not having you squandering it on beer.'

'I didn't,' said Bella, 'honest,' and looked at Jack Ford.

'I bought it,' said Ford.

'And where would you get the money for beer?' she asked. 'All you've got is your strike pay.'

Ford said, 'I squandered me strike pay.' She opened her mouth to argue but he cut in sharply, 'And don't start on me, bonny lass,' he said, then more gently, 'not when the sun's shining. It doesn't shine all that often. Come on—let's go for that walk.'

Jessie said, 'I thought you'd be sick of walking.'

'By myself I am,' he said.

'Soft-soap,' she said, 'that's all you're good for,' but she smiled. Then her mood changed once more and she turned to her mother.

'We'll be back in an hour, mam,' she said, 'try and have the tea ready for then, and see if you can tidy the place up a bit. It's like a pigsty.'

'Have a heart, Jess,' her mother said. 'I've been at it all day.'

Jessie looked ironically at her mother seated at the table, then at the beer. 'Yes,' she said, 'I can see you have.' Then it was Ford's turn. 'You've got a coat to wear, I hope?'

'Aye,' he said, 'it's here.' He took his coat from the back of his chair and put it on. A nudge against his hip reminded him that he had a quarter bottle of gin in the pocket. He watched as Jessie went to the mirror to adjust her hat, then slipped the gin to Bella. As Jessie turned round, Bella hid the gin bottle in the pocket of the coarse apron she was wearing. Silently her lips formed the words, 'Thanks, Jack.'

Jessie said, 'We're off, mam,' and then, 'You'll come back to tea with us, Jack?'

Ford said, 'If I'm asked.'

'Haven't I just asked you?' said Jessie then broke off.

Ford was not looking at her but at her mother.

Bella Seaton said, 'You're always welcome to this house, Jack.'

'Thanks, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford and then went out. Bella Seaton filled her glass with beer and added a nip of gin. A canny lad, Jack Ford. A real canny lad...

In the back yard Jessie Seaton turned to Ford and said, 'I don't think we should go out.'

'Why not?' said Ford. 'It's a lovely day.'

'Because I'm going to cry—that's why not,' said Jessie.

All that fire, thought Ford, then you have to go and drown it in tears. You were right, and you know you were right. There shouldn't be money for beer, and the house was a mess because Bella had spent her time playing with young Tommy instead of tidying it up. But she is your mother, and I reminded you of it and that's what made you cry. Aloud he said, 'What do you want to cry for?'

He kissed her and she responded and then broke away.

'If anybody was to see us—' she said.

'We'd tell them we were taking a walk out in the back yard,' said Ford and again she smiled. 'You see? You weren't going to cry after all.'

The walk started with a tram ride down to the beach, and after that they strolled along the promenade arm in arm. The promenade was a mile of concrete with swings and round-

abouts and a bandstand at the end of it all where a brass band thumped out selections from 'Floradora'. The sun shone, children darted across the sand as surely as the seagulls wheeled and planed in the sky above them. Slowly Jessie began to relax and talk of school matters: of the difficulties of teaching children too hungry to concentrate, of children barefoot, in rags, of the bewilderment of her headmaster, Mr. Ashton, a stranger from the rich south who did not know such things existed and was ashamed to find they did.

Still getting at me, thought Ford; it's an indirect approach but none the worse for that. I'll never change her: nobody could ... Behind them a voice shouted, 'Jack!' He looked round, and Jessie followed his gaze

'Our Tom,' she said disgustedly. 'It would be.'

Tom hurried over to them. 'Mam said you'd come down to the prom,' he said. 'I was afraid I'd missed you. Could I have a quick word, Jack?'

Ford said, 'You walk on, Jessie. I'll catch you up.' She glared at Tom, stayed where she was. Ford said gently, 'Now don't start, bonny lass, not when the sun's shining.'

Reluctantly she walked on.

'Well, Tom?' said Ford.

But now that Tom Seaton had Ford to himself it seemed he didn't know where to begin.

'I was wondering—' he said at last. 'I meant I just thought maybe—'

Ford said, 'How much this time, Tom?'

'A few bob,' said Tom. 'If you could spare it. Mary's not well and I'm skint. There's hardly enough food in the house for her either. Not when she's feeding the bairn.'

Ford put his hand in his pocket and took out a pound note.

'A whole quid,' said Tom, awed. 'Thanks, Jack.'

'That's for Mary and the bairn,' said Ford and reaching into another pocket took out a half-crown.

'This is for beer,' he said. Tom Seaton said again, 'Thanks, Jack.'

'And don't get it mixed up,' said Ford.

Bastard, thought Tom, as if I would ever spend money on beer that could be spent on Mary, but he kept the grateful look on his face.

'Because if you do,' said Ford, 'I'll belt you.' He turned away and Tom called after him, 'Jack.'

Ford looked back.

'I could help you,' said Tom.

Ford shook his head. 'No, Tom.'

'That way I could pay you back,' Tom Seaton said.

'No,' said Ford, and walked after Jessie...

*

Beyond the bandstand were the sand dunes, the hollows in the dunes a traditional place for lovers. Beyond the promenade Jessie and Ford went and he took off his coat, laid it on the sand. They lay together side by side and he embraced her. In the distance the brass band thumped its way more gently through 'Roses of Picardy', the sea washed against the shore on an ebbing tide, a seagull gave a muted, not unpleasant scream ... She realised, not for the first time, that she was by no means the first woman in his life; realised too that he brought to his love-making the same concentration of himself that he brought to everything else, a technique no less demanding because of the gentleness bewildering in so strong and forthright a man. Hands and lips were coaxing her, cajoling, persuading, and it would have been as easy to let herself go with him as it was for the tide to ebb, but at last she struggled free.

'That's enough, Jack,' she said.

'By God, it's not,' said Ford.

He reached for her again, but still his hands were gentle, there was not the least suggestion of force in his grasp. She turned her face from him.

'No,' she said into his shoulder, 'it isn't. But it's got to be. Not just now. Not with mam and dad depending on me, and

our Billy. I daren't get pregnant, Jack ... I daren't.'

'We've waited a long time, Jessie,' said Ford.

'You think I don't know?' Her voice was bitter.

'And it's going to be longer,' Ford said.

'Unless you get work.'

Ford laughed, but there was no amusement in that laughter. 'Work?' he said. 'Round here? Every shipyard closed, every pit shut down. It's two months since I had a job. Look at my hands.'

He held them out in front of her and she touched them. They were as soft as her own. Slowly, infinitesimally she moved away from him and looked out at the sea and the screaming gulls.

'I think you're working,' she said.

'Don't talk daft,' said Ford.

'If you're not working,' she asked, 'where are you getting the money from?'

'Who says I am?' he asked.

'I do,' she said. 'Beer for my mam. Loans for our Tom ... Where do you get it, Jack?'

He sat up to face her. 'I had a bit put by.'

'You? Saving?'

'And there are odd jobs,' he said. 'Sometimes.'

'What kind of odd jobs?'

Ford pulled a piece of bent-grass from the sand dune and began to chew at its end, then lay back on the sand, looked up into the sky. His face was lazy, careful.

'Wait till we're married and I'll tell you,' he said.

Beyond the laziness and wariness she could sense something that was unthinkable in Jack Ford. She could sense despair.

'Things'll get better, Jack. You'll see.'

She bent to kiss him and he embraced her but she struggled free. 'Come on, Jack,' she said. 'Let's go home for tea.'

Tea was corned beef, tomatoes and pickled onions, a cake

and bread both baked by Bella. The whole family was sat down to tea: Tom and Mary, Bella and Bill, Jessie and Jack: in a corner Tommy was asleep in the drawer of a chest lined with a pillow and covered by Bella's shawl. Bill Seaton pushed back his chair and sighed his content.

'Very nice, mother,' he said, 'very nice. There's not many in this street sat down to a tea like that this day.'

'Bread and scrape for most of them,' Jack Ford said.

'And jam if they're lucky,' said Tom. 'We must all be bloody fools—'

His father said, 'I'll have no language here, Tom Seaton.'

'It would take a bit more than language,' said Tom. 'We're in the eleventh week, da. We could all be back to work if we wanted.'

'For what the employers is offering?' said his father. 'Starvation wages?'

As the men argued, Jessie, Bella and Mary cleared away the tea things, went into the tiny scullery to wash up. It was obvious that Jessie would much sooner have stayed and argued.

'As it is,' said Ford, 'all we've got is starvation, Mr. Seaton. No wages at all.'

Bill Seaton regarded him with the massive tolerance of a miner towards someone who is not a miner.

'You're a good lad, Jack,' he said. 'But you worked in the shipyards—and your union doesn't understand a fight. Not like the miners.'

Tom Seaton said, 'And we understand nowt else. But I'll tell you something we don't understand, da, and that's how to win a bloody fight once it's started.'

'I've told you before,' said Bill Seaton. 'No language in my house.'

Something was really bothering Tom that day, thought Ford. Something more important than politics, or strikes or even poverty.

'Your house?' Tom Seaton said. '*Your house?* Don't make me laugh.'

From the scullery, Mary called out, 'Tom—don't.'

'You shut up an'all,' said Tom. 'I'm entitled to me say.' Then to his father, 'This hasn't been your house since the lock-out started.'

Bill Seaton said, 'Don't talk daft.'

'I'm not talking daft,' said Tom.

Softly, Jack Ford said, 'Easy, man. Easy.'

'If it's not my house then whose is it?' Bill Seaton said.

'Hers,' said Tom and pointed at Jessie carrying plates from the scullery to stack in the kitchen dresser 'She's the one who pays your rent If it wasn't for her you'd be out on the street—aye and starving an'all.'

Bill Seaton too got to his feet. 'You impident bugger,' he said, 'if you were ten years younger—'

'Aye but I'm not,' said Tom. 'I'm 24 and look at her.' He pointed to Mary. 'She's 22. But you wouldn't believe it. She looks more like 35—and a worn out 35 at that.'

'Please Tom,' his wife said. 'Please.'

Tom went on unheeding. 'And I'll tell you why,' he said. 'It's because she's got T.B.—and what am I supposed to do about it? Send her to Switzerland on me strike pay?'

Mary flinched at that. Tom's hand hadn't moved but he'd hit her where it hurt most.

Bill Seaton said, 'Is it true, pet?'

'No, it's not,' said Mary.

Tom Seaton began, 'Mary, you know fine well—'

But she wouldn't listen to him. 'I've got a cough,' she said. 'That's all it is. A cough.'

'They told you at the clinic it was T.B.,' said Tom.

The look she gave him was almost one of hatred. 'Then they told us wrong,' she said. 'It's a cough—that's all it is—a cough.'

She burst into tears and Bella bustled out of the scullery, drying her hands on her apron, and embraced her. Tom Seaton watched his wife cry.

'What's the use?' he said. 'She just won't listen.'

In his voice Jessie caught the same note of despair that she'd heard in Jack Ford's.

'Shut up, man,' said Ford. 'You've said enough.'

Bill Seaton looked at his daughter-in law still sobbing in the arms of his wife.

'More than enough,' he said. Then, to his son, 'Are you going to the Lodge meeting?'

Tom shrugged. 'Might as well I suppose,' he said.

'Time we were shaping,' said Bill, and rose to his feet.

'We'll not be long, mother.'

'Aye. All right,' said Bella and continued to soothe Mary as she might have soothed her infant son.

'Wisht now, hinny,' she crooned. 'There's no need to take on like that.'

But to herself she thought grimly, isn't there? Consumption killed your mother, and four more in this street that I know of, and goodness knows how many hundreds in the town. You go ahead and cry, me bairn. God knows you've earned the right. Tom walked over to Mary, hesitated, then made a gesture that said as plain as words: oh what's the use? and followed his father to go to the union meeting.

Jessie said, 'I'm sorry, Jack.'

'For what?' said Ford. 'For Tom? For her?' he nodded towards Mary, then rose. 'Coming out again?'

Jessie said, 'I can't.'

Tom looked towards Mary and Bella: the older woman's almost meaningless crooning was having its effect; Mary's sobs were easier now.

'Better leave your mother alone with her,' he said. 'She knows what's best.'

'It isn't that,' said Jessie. 'I've got homework to mark.'

'Can't it keep till tomorrow?' said Ford.

'I've got to give it back tomorrow,' she said. 'The children need—'

But he interrupted her. 'The children need and your parents need and your brothers need. And I need an'all. I need you.

But there's times I think there's not enough of you to go round.' He turned away. 'Any idea when you'll have some time to spare for me?'

'Honestly, Jack,' she said. 'It's not that I don't want—' but he still wouldn't turn to face her. 'Our Billy gets home on Wednesday,' she said. 'Come and see him.'

'What about you?' said Ford.

'I really have got an awful lot of—' she began, but that wasn't the way to handle Jack Ford. 'Wednesday,' she said. 'I'll be free, I promise.'

'Marvellous,' he said. 'Goodnight, Mrs. Seaton.'

Still soothing Mary, Bella Seaton said, 'Goodnight, bonny lad.'

He left and Mary disengaged herself from Bella's arms, went to look at herself in the mirror.

Jessie looked from her mother to her sister-in-law: despite her training, despite her intelligence she knew she could be of little help in this situation with which her mother coped so effortlessly.

'I'll work in the front room, mam,' she said and went to the door.

Her mother said, 'You'll lose that man.'

'I don't think so,' Jessie said.

'Think?' said Bella. 'You'll have to do more than think to hold a man like Jack Ford.' But Jessie went out unheeding to the waiting piles of exercise books: long division, multiplication, the story of the Romans in Britain. Bella turned to Mary. 'Have you done then?' she asked.

Still looking in the mirror, Mary said, 'Aye ... I've done ... I look awful.'

'You'll look better when you've washed your face,' said Bella but her daughter-in-law wasn't listening.

Mary said, 'Tom's right. I look old.'

Bella Seaton said, 'Thirty-five's not old,' and instantly admonished herself: watch your tongue, you stupid woman.

Mary said, 'It's old for me, mam. I'm old and worn out. But I used to be pretty—didn't I?'

'You did,' said Bella softly—'I remember your wedding . . .'

'So do I, mam,' said Mary. 'It was like it happened to a different woman.' She went to the sink in the scullery and began to wash the tears from her face: her hands were shaking as she used soap, water and towel. Bella took the gin bottle and two glasses from the cupboard where she'd hidden them, and poured out two drinks as Mary, still dabbing at her face with the towel, went to look at the sleeping boy.

'He's a good bairn,' said Bella. 'Sleeps that sound—'

'When he's not hungry,' her daughter-in-law said.

She bent over to touch the boy, then suddenly she began to cough, a dry cough that racked her whole body, causing her to grimace with the pain of it. Suddenly she covered her mouth with the towel and ran outside, then came back almost at once.

'Ee hinny,' said Bella, 'you have got a bad cough.'

'It'll get better,' said Mary with a kind of weak fierceness.

'Of course it will,' said Bella. 'Here. Try a drop of this.'

She pushed one of the glasses of gin to Mary, who smiled, trying to make a joke of it.

'Good for coughs is it?' she asked.

'Sovereign remedy,' said Bella. 'That's why I take it regular. You've never heard me cough, now have you?' She raised her glass. 'Always take a drop when you can,' she said, and drank, and sighed her content. 'God knows we don't have much, and if we couldn't get this we'd have nowt at all.' Slowly Mary Seaton lifted her glass to her mouth.

8

His girl had no time for him, but there were still his mates to see, and besides he had business to talk over with them. The 'Bluebell' was now Company Headquarters, the most comfortable one he'd ever had, but they had to be careful. It didn't do to drink too much in a town where hardly anybody had enough money to drink at all. Charlie Stobbs and Paddy Boyle waited expectantly as Matt Headley went to the bar. There was no rush, the place was nearly empty ... He had picked two good men to work with him and Matt, thought Ford A couple of hard ones, Charlie and Paddy, who knew how to keep their mouths shut, and Paddy was in the butchering trade when he could get work, and that helped. Matt Headley bustled back towards them with three pints of beer and a whisky for Ford, as Charlie Stobbs said, 'I thought you'd have been courting a fine night like this.'

'No,' said Jack. 'Bloody homework to mark.'

'Serves you right for fancying a schoolteacher,' said Paddy Boyle.

Matt Headley set the drinks in front of them. 'Here you are,' he said. 'Get them down you,' then, as the others drank, he said softly to Ford, 'I think it's time we had a change of pubs, Jack.'

Charlie Stobbs emerged from his pint. 'Don't talk daft,' he said. 'This is the best beer for miles.'

But when it came to common sense Ford would sooner listen to Matt Headley any day. Stobbs was as hard as he was reliable, but he was impulsive too.

'Just a minute, Charlie,' he said. 'What happened, Matt?'

'The barmaid,' said Headley.

Casually Ford looked over towards her.

Henna'd hair and hands just about the same colour, red from washing glasses, but she had an observant eye on her even so. 'I gave the order,' said Matt, 'and "My," she says, "you must be flush".'

'What did you tell her?' asked Ford.

'I said we'd had a good win on the whippets,' said Matt.

'And did she believe you?'

Matt Headley grinned. 'She did when I bought her a gin,' he said.

'Good lad,' said Ford. 'All the same, I think you're right.'

'Oh hell,' said Stobbs. 'There's nowt to worry about.'

'Isn't there?' said Ford, and looked at the other three.

Paddy Boyle said, 'You're the gaffer, Jack.'

Charlie Stobbs looked disgusted, and Ford said, 'Am I the gaffer, Charlie?'

At once Stobbs gave in. Things were going well because Jack made them go well. No sense in starting a lot of fuss just because he liked a pub that sold good beer.

'Aye,' he said. 'All right. We'll find a new pub.'

Matt Headley said, 'I heard of a job, Jack—up Hexham way. Might suit us.'

'Not yet, Matt,' said Ford. 'Weather forecast's too good.' He knew that was true, he went to the periodicals room of the public library every day to check.

'The moon's just right,' Paddy said.

'No clouds,' said Ford. 'Hasn't been for days.' He wouldn't go on a trench raid this weather.

'What'll we do then?' Paddy Boyle asked.

'Wait,' said Ford.

He could sense the disappointment in all three of them, but that was just too bad. They'd gone into this to make money, not headlines in the local newspaper. He finished his drink and stood up. 'I'd better be off. Otherwise I'll miss me tram.'

'Come and have a bite first,' said Matt. 'Me sister's made some supper.'

'I thought she was in service,' said Ford.

'Aye, she is,' said Headley. 'Out at Corbridge. Only her gaffer's gone off on a cruise—lucky bugger.'

Ford said, 'Thanks anyway, Matt—but I can't. Last tram's in ten minutes.'

'You've walked farther in France, Jack,' said Matt, 'and fared worse. She's a bloody good cook—and she's made a pie.'

Paddy Boyle said, 'Maybe she doesn't know Jack's spoken for.'

'That wouldn't bother Dolly,' said Matt. 'She thinks us manual workers is low.'

'She does, does she?' said Ford.

'She does these days,' Matt Headley said. 'Her first husband was a joiner—killed at Wipers. Second battalion man. Now she's got a bank clerk chasing after her—so *you've* nowt to worry about.'

'What sort of pie's she made?' said Ford.

'Steak and kidney.'

'You're on,' said Ford. 'Goodnight, lads.'

Ford and Matt Headley left them, and the other two finished their beer as a quiet man with his back to them got up from the table, and followed in the direction that Jack and Matt had taken. His face meant nothing to Charlie Stobbs and Paddy Boyle; it was the face of Tom Seaton.

9

The steak and kidney pie was all that Matt had promised, but he hadn't told the half of it about his sister, a pretty redhead with a kind of mockery that appealed to him; mockery that he was sure was a cover for loneliness. He and Matt sat with a bottle of whisky between them as Matt's sister Dolly coped with the washing up; the whisky had not been bought at the pub, that barmaid had seen enough. He thought of the barmaid's henna'd hair, then looked up as Dolly turned round, brushing at one of her own red locks that had escaped the slide that held them in place. But with her the redness was real.

'Looks like you've got enough to keep you going all night,' she said.

'Looks like it,' said her brother. 'Fancy a glass?'

'No thank you,' the woman said. 'I wouldn't say no to a fag though.'

'Here,' said Ford, and went across to her; held out his cigarettes and lit the one she took.

'Well,' she said, 'it's nice to see some people still have manners.' She smiled and looked prettier than ever.

'That's one in the eye for me,' said Matt, as Ford returned to his seat.

'Have you known our Matt long, Mr. Ford?' Dolly Mather asked.

'Call him Jack, man,' said her brother, 'same as everybody else does.'

'Have you?' she persisted.

'How long, Matt?' Ford asked.

Matt pondered. 'Five years,' he said—'getting on for six. He was my sergeant, Dolly.'

'Oh,' the woman said, 'the war.'

'Aye,' said Ford, 'the war.'

'Were you in long?' she asked.

'Start to finish,' he said, 'and a bit more ... long enough.'

Dolly drew deeply on her cigarette. The lock of hair had still escaped its slide, but she looked no less pretty for that.

'I lost my husband,' she said. 'Did Matt tell you?'

'Aye,' said Ford, 'he did. I'm sorry.'

'Three months we were married,' said Dolly. 'Three months—and two leaves. And then a telegram. That was over four years ago and I still miss him.'

Matt Headley said, 'At least he was spared this.'

'Spared what?' his sister asked.

'Bloody lock-outs,' said Matt. 'Bloody strikes.'

'We don't see much of that where I'm working,' said Dolly.

Jack Ford said, 'We see nowt else round here.'

Matt poured more whisky and Dolly watched. With a sister's candour she admitted to herself that Matt was drunk, yet the feller with him had gone drink for drink with her brother, and looked steady as a rock. The two men drank.

'It doesn't seem to have harmed you two,' she said.

'Jack's got a cousin works in the stables at Ripon,' said Matt. 'He gets a few tips for the races'

The idea of being connected, even remotely, with the genteel world of racing seemed to intrigue her.

'Do you?' she asked. 'Do you really?'

'Sometimes,' said Ford.

'So you're not starving like some?' she said.

Jack Ford said, 'I made up my mind a long time ago, Mrs. Mather, that one thing I would never do was starve.'

Then what made him sound so bitter about it? she wondered.

Matt Headley said, 'Mrs. Mather ... call her Dolly, man.'

'You said that about not starving as though you meant it,' Dolly Mather said.

'I do mean it,' said Ford.

She looked at him, bewildered. That there should be a choice between going hungry and not going hungry in the town where she was born had never occurred to her.

'But the people round here—they can't help it,' she said.

Jack Ford said, 'The people round here are sheep, Mrs. Mather—'

'Now, Jack,' said Matt Headley.

But Ford ignored him—'with a dog yapping at their heels driving them to the butcher's. I don't want to be a dog—but I wouldn't mind being a butcher.'

Dolly Mather said, 'Your friend's clever, Matt.'

'Aye,' Matt Headley said, 'he is.'

'You can tell the way he talks,' said Dolly, 'but he's still out of work.'

She took off her apron, hung it up on a peg on the back of the door, then turned to Jack Ford and held out her hand.

'I'll say goodnight, Mr. Ford,' she said.

'Goodnight, Mrs. Mather,' said Ford, and rose, and shook her hand.

'Just a minute,' said Matt. 'It's past midnight, Jack. A bit late for walking home. Why don't you kip down here? There's a couch in the front—'

'Thanks all the same,' said Ford. 'I'll manage.'

'You've had a canny bit to drink—and you know what the bobbies are like round here,' said Matt. There was an edge to his voice. 'We don't want you getting arrested.'

Ford thought, I've had more to drink than I realised. I should have thought of that one for meself. Aloud he said, 'Aye, you're right . . . if you're sure it's no trouble.'

Matt Headley rose, not quite steadily, to his feet.

'I'll get you some blankets,' he said.

Dolly Mather had a vision of her brother fumbling his way upstairs, clashing doors, hauling blankets out of a cupboard.

'No,' she said. 'I'll do that. I don't want you waking mam up. Goodnight, Mr. Ford. See you in the morning.'

She went out, and Matt Headley yawned. 'It is the bloody morning,' he said.

Jack Ford sipped what was left of his whisky. 'Go on up if you want to,' he said.

'Might as well have a nightcap first,' said Matt Headley and poured another drink...

Outside the Headley house Tom watched. He didn't know why, didn't even know why he'd begun to follow Jack Ford in the first place. But there was money in it, he knew. A feller who could hand out a pound note like a penny to a street-singer had to have money. And there'd been half-a-dollar for beer. He'd appreciated that, if only Jack hadn't been so off-hand about it, just more bloody charity. It wasn't charity he wanted, it was money earned, money to take care of Mary, and maybe this was his lucky night. It could be. Could be tonight was the night when he would learn the secret: where the hell the money came from ... Until that moment there had been only one light shining in Matt Headley's house, the light in the kitchen, but now the gas was lit in their front room. Cautiously Tom edged up to the wall of the house, and risked a quick glance in the window where the curtains were not quite drawn. There was a young woman making up a bed on a couch, a pretty young woman he had never seen before in his life, but it shouldn't take much to find out who she was, not if there was money in it.

Still in the kitchen, Matt and Jack Ford were singing softly together:

'There's a long long trail awinding unto the land of my dreams, Where the nightingales are singing and the bright moon beams...'

Matt Headley said, 'Trouble is the moon's too bloody bright.'

Ford said comfortably, 'The clouds'll come,' and reached for his whisky.

'Aye,' said Matt. 'They always do.'

'You can still get the van all right?' said Ford.

'No bother,' said Matt. 'The bloke that owns it doesn't even know when it's been borrowed.'

'Good lad,' said Ford. 'I'll let you know when.'

Matt began to sing again:

'There's a long long night of waiting,
Until my dreams are all come true.'

Jack Ford joined in and they sang together:

'Until the day when I'll be turning
Down that long long trail to you.'

Matt Headley sighed. 'It seems like ages ago,' he said.

'Another bloody world,' said Ford.

'At least we haven't forgotten trench raids,' Matt Headley said.

'Just as well,' said Ford.

'Aye,' said Matt, and began to laugh, a drunken, admiring laugh. 'Look at you. The youngest sergeant in the regiment. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

'I am sometimes,' said Ford. 'But it's still better than starving.'

'Jack,' said Matt, 'I didn't mean—it was just a joke like.'

Ford smiled. 'I know,' he said and drank more whisky.

'That lass of yours,' Matt Headley said. 'Has she any idea of what you're up to?'

'No,' said Ford.

'You ever going to tell her?' asked Matt.

'Maybe,' said Ford, 'after we're married—if we ever are.'

■

When he got to bed at last, he couldn't sleep. The couch was soft enough and the blankets warm, but there was too much to think about, too much to remember. 'You should be

ashamed of yourself': the whisky had made him too imaginative. He could see an image of slaughtered animals lying on the bodies of slaughtered men, but it wasn't like that. 'I made up my mind a long time ago, Mrs. Mather, that one thing I would never do was starve.' But he'd made up his mind to achieve a lot more than that. Ever since his time in Intelligence at Murmansk he'd known that there was a power inside him, that if that power was used right Jack Ford could get anything he wanted. For himself, that was his idea. It wasn't Jessie's . . .

From the doorway a voice whispered, 'Mr. Ford. Mr. Ford.' He sat up on the couch: it was Dolly Mather.

'Yes,' he said. She came in wearing a coat over her dressing-gown and carrying another blanket.

'I thought you might be cold,' she said. 'I brought this down for you.'

'Thanks,' said Ford.

She spread it on the couch on top of him. Something in the gesture reminded him of the countess's maid—Natasha, was it? Marguerita? Then she reminded him of the Russian woman even more.

'Can I,' she said and hesitated. 'Can I have another cigarette?' The other maid too had had just that hesitancy, that diffidence whenever she had asked for something.

'Of course,' said Ford and reached out and found the packet.

'I'll have one with you,' he said.

'Oh,' said Dolly Mather—'I didn't mean—I don't think I should smoke it here.'

'I do,' said Ford. He held out the packet and she took a cigarette from it and he lit it for her, then held up the match so that he could see her.

'You're a very pretty woman,' he said.

Dolly Mather said, 'I think you've had a drop too much.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I have. I can still see you're pretty.' He put out a hand, took her by the wrist and drew her towards him.

'Hey now,' the woman said. 'Wait a minute.'

'And I can still think an'all,' said Ford. Once again she summoned mockery to her defence.

'Funny way of thinking you've got,' she said, but he continued to pull her forward; she sat on the couch.

'You said, "Three months and two leaves", and then you said, "I still miss him",' said Ford.

'Well I do,' she said.

'That was over four years ago, you said. Four years without a man,' said Ford.

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't have to,' said Ford. 'It was written all over you.'

'You're bloody rude,' she said and tried to get away, but he held her beside him.

'Not rude, bonny lass,' he said. 'Honest. It's been a long time for me an'all.' He pushed her coat from her shoulders and drew her to him. 'Too bloody long.'

'Mind my cigarette,' Dolly Mather said.

Ford took it from her and stubbed it out in an ashtray. 'You can smoke it later,' he said, then embraced her.

Dolly Mather said, 'I wish you didn't smell of whisky,' but she yielded to the embrace.

Tom Seaton stood by the window listening—eavesdropping some people would call it, but he didn't care. The street was silent, everyone about had gone to bed early to save their strength, to combat tomorrow's hunger: only in the distance a ship's siren softly blared, but he didn't miss a word.

'No, I won't take it off,' she said.

Then Ford replied: 'Of course you won't. I'll do it for you.'

A pause, then the woman again: 'You are just awful, Jack Ford ... awful.'

Then Ford's voice saying, 'That's because I'm out of practice.' And then she giggled, the giggle became a sigh.

Tom Seaton stayed where he was. A part of him felt ashamed that he should do such a thing, ashamed at the dawning excitement he could feel, ashamed too that he should

do such a thing to Ford, who had helped him so often and without question. Then there was the anger—for Jessie's sake. She loved this man and he was betraying her without thought, uncaring. But even more important was the sense of power it gave him: the great Jack Ford was now in his hands, and he could crush him or let him go just as he chose. The thought disgusted him and he prepared to move off, then suddenly as the girl sighed once more he remembered Mary and himself, Mary well and pretty and desirable. He had to stay on, to be absolutely sure, for her sake...

They lay together on the couch, smoking. The couch was so narrow that even had they wanted to they could not lie apart. They didn't want to.

Dolly said, 'I must have gone raving mad.'

'No,' said Jack. 'You were just hungry, like me.'

She wriggled so that she could look into his face.

'Matt says you've got a young lady,' she said.

'That's right.'

'Do you—' Dolly began.

'No,' he said. 'We don't.'

'Oh,' said Dolly. 'Sorry I spoke. But I do think I have a right to ask.'

'You did,' said Jack Ford. 'And I answered.'

'*Why* don't you—?' she said.

He looked at her more closely; surely to God she was trying to make him angry, to take her revenge for what they had just done, but when he looked at her face it showed enquiry only; you might even say innocent enquiry. But there had to be more to it than that.

'You're trying to get me to insult you,' said Ford.

'You know all about everything, don't you?' she said. 'What I want, what I'm doing.' She reached carefully across him to drop the ash from her cigarette into the ashtray, then let her hand rest on his chest. 'I don't mind,' she said. 'In fact I like it... Did Matt tell you I was courting?'

'Bank clerk, he said.'

'He wants to marry me,' said Dolly.

'Will you?'

'Maybe,' she said. 'We'll see. I want to tell you something.'

'Aye?'

She sat up on the couch, moved as far away from him as she could.

'This was the first time since Bert was killed,' she said. 'Do you believe that?'

'I believe it,' he said.

'You don't really.'

'I said I believed it and I believe it,' said Ford.

'You're a very—kind man, Jack.' She giggled once more, but this time the giggling was pure amusement.

'Now what?' said Ford.

'In the morning I'll have to call you Mr. Ford,' she said.

Once again she reached across him, stubbed out her cigarette, but this time she eased her body into his.

'You know what you said about us being hungry,' she said. 'I still am.'

As he reached out for her, Tom Seaton moved silently away, careful that his boots should make no noise on the flagstones. He'd got enough—more than enough.

10

Listlessly Bella Seaton swept out her kitchen. She was hot and she was thirsty, and there was almost nothing to drink, but the kitchen still had to be swept. Folk might be hungry, there might be no jobs, but there was always dust, and in Bella Seaton's creed dust had to be swept away. She pushed with the brush and watched the motes dancing in the sunlight ... Outside a familiar voice called, 'Anybody in?' and she relaxed, leaning on the brush as a resting soldier might lean on his rifle. Jack Ford came in from the yard.

'How are you then, Mrs. Seaton?' he said.

'Canny,' she said. 'Just giving the kitchen a bit of a turnout.' She put down her broom and sat.

'Jessie about?' said Ford.

'School doesn't get out till quarter past,' said Bella. 'Billy's back.'

'What's he doing?' said Ford. 'Studying?'

'Worrying himself sick,' she said. 'Waiting for exam results. Clever bairns are always on the fidget.' She hesitated and said, 'Jack.'

He looked at her, his thoughts otherwhere.

'Excuse me asking,' she said, 'but you didn't manage to bring—?'

'Sorry, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford. 'I'm a bit short meself now.'

A man like Jack Ford had no right to go thirsty on a day like this.

'I've still got one bottle left,' said Bella. 'If you fancy it?'

'No thanks,' said Ford. 'You keep it ... How's Mary?'

'Bad,' said Bella. 'And getting worse. It's galloping, Jack, but

she won't have it it's T.B. ... And I can't say I blame her.' There was a sound of footsteps outside and at once Bella Seaton got up and resumed work with the brush as her daughter came in. Jessie's eyes went straight to Ford, and for once she seemed embarrassed, almost shy.

'Oh, hullo,' she said.

'Hullo, bonny lass,' said Ford. 'How's the school?'

'All right,' she said. 'The fine weather helps.'

'They're not all away playing truant then,' said Ford.

'Oh there's some,' she said, 'but I was thinking of the ones with no shoes. They're better off when it's warm and dry. They don't get so hungry either—and there's another soup kitchen opened on Barratt Street. Honestly it's more like being a nurse than a teacher.'

Bella put down her brush and surveyed the kitchen: pride and disgust mingled in her glance; pride that the kitchen was clean, disgust that the dust would be back next day.

'There,' she said. 'That's better ...' She turned to her daughter. 'I was thinking I might slip down to the shop and get some sardines for our tea.'

'All right, mother,' said Jessie.

Bella coughed nervously. 'I'll need some money, Jessie,' she said.

Jessie Seaton began, 'But I gave you two shillings just—' then she stopped and looked at Ford. Resignedly she said, 'All right, mother,' then opened her bag and handed over a shilling. 'There you are,' she said.

'Thanks, pet,' said Bella and left.

Mrs. Seaton certainly believes in leaving us alone to get on with our courting, thought Ford, but Jessie had other things to discuss.

'There's kids in my class starving,' she said.

'I know.'

'And do you care as well?' But the gentleness of her voice took the sting out of her words.

'Would it do any good if I did?' said Ford.

'*Somebody* ought to do something,' she said.

'Nobody will.' The utter certainty of his voice dismayed her.

'You mustn't talk like that,' she said. 'You mustn't, not you. You should be fighting this mess—not giving in to it.' She paused, then said, 'I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean to bully you. Not today.'

She moved across the kitchen to stand in front of him, looking like a penitent small girl.

'I was rotten to you last time,' she said.

'No, you weren't.'

'I was, Jack,' she said. 'And I'm sorry. Honestly.' She moved closer. 'Have I got to ask you to kiss me then?'

He was almost helpless before her; the urge to put his arms round her had never been greater and yet it was a difficult, perhaps impossible thing to do. When the door to the passage opened behind him he looked round with relief. It was Billy.

'Was that the telegram boy?' Billy asked.

'No, it wasn't,' said Jessie. Billy sensed the anger in her voice, knew its cause.

'Oh,' he said, 'sorry. I er—hullo, Jack.'

'Hullo,' said Ford.

'I'll see you later,' said Billy and turned to go.

'Don't bother,' said Jessie. 'Stay and talk to Jack. I've got to have a wash,' and went out past him.

'I picked a bad time,' said Billy.

'Aye.'

'You and our Jessie had a row?' Billy asked.

'Not a row exactly,' said Ford.

'You've been engaged too long,' Billy said. 'You're like an old married couple. It's not natural ... I'm sorry, Jack. I hope I'm not being rude.'

'You're not.'

'Then why don't you get married?' Billy asked.

'Can't afford it, lad,' said Ford.

'Why not?' said Billy. 'She's working.'

'But your da's not and Tom's not and neither am I.'

'And neither am I,' said Billy. 'Is that it?'

'She thinks so,' said Ford. 'But that's got nowt to do with it.'

'Hasn't it?' Billy asked.

'No,' said Ford. 'It hasn't. When I get married—I'll be the one who goes out to work.'

'Masculine pride,' said Billy.

Just like his sister, thought Ford. Aloud he said, 'It's all we've got left.'

'You mustn't think I don't know what Jessie's doing for me,' said Billy.

'Not just for you,' said Ford.

'You've heard about Tom's wife?'

Ford said, 'It's no secret.'

'He wants me to treat her,' Billy said. 'There is no treatment—except the right food and the right climate. And even if there was I couldn't give it to her. I'm not allowed. I've still got two years to do before I qualify ... I might never be qualified.'

'Don't talk daft,' said Ford. But Billy refused to surrender his gloom.

'That last exam was a bastard,' he said.

'You'll be all right,' said Ford. 'You mope too much, that's all. Come out with me—we'll take a hike. Stretch your legs.'

'Where?' Billy asked.

'Hexham,' said Ford.

'I'd like to,' said Billy, 'if only that exam—'

He broke off as his mother came in. In one hand there was a tin of sardines, in the other a telegram. She said, 'I hate these rotten things ever since the war.' She handed the buff envelope to Billy. 'I met the telegram boy on the way back,' she said. 'It's for you, son.'

Billy took it, fiddled with it, hands shaking, but he didn't open it; he handed it to Ford instead.

'You open it for me, Jack,' he said and Ford opened the telegram as Jessie came in, stood watching as Ford wrestled

with its contents. At last he said, 'It looks like double dutch to me—but you've passed, kidder.'

'I haven't,' said Billy.

'See for yourself,' said Ford and handed over the telegram. Billy's eyes flashed over it.

'I've passed the lot!' he said.

'Oh Billy!' said Jessie and ran to him and embraced him.

Bella Seaton turned to Ford. 'Jack, I was nearly forgetting,' she said, 'our Tom says he'd like a word with you when you've got a minute. He can't get over today on account of Mary—she's bad in bed.'

'All right, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford. 'Did he say what it was about?'

'Feller he knew in the army—Bert Mather—he was killed. Tom wanted to know if you could help him find his widow's address.'

At once Jessie said, 'Tom's up to something.'

'Oh I don't think so,' said Ford. 'Mrs. Mather is Matt Headley's sister and Matt's the best mate I've got.'

But he was glad his hands were in his pockets as he talked. Instinctively they had bunched into fists.

■

This time the brass band was playing selections from 'The Maid of the Mountains' as Ford and Jessie walked along the promenade towards it. Despite the warmth of the day there weren't all that many people about, and those there were had no money left for swings and roundabouts. Jessie said, 'That's good news about our Billy. It was nice of you to think of taking him on a hike tomorrow—but how'll you manage for money?'

'We'll manage,' said Ford.

She looked up at him: the old, hard, questioning look, then shook her head at herself.

'After we're married, you said. I'll save all the questions till then,' she said.

It was too much. He had to tell her something, to warn her. Before he could speak she hurried on. 'Our Billy thinks the world of you,' she said. 'So does mam. You're very well liked in our family, Jack. And I'm glad. Because I love you. You know that, don't you? I love you so much there's times I can't bear it. When we quarrelled the other night I—hated myself. I couldn't sleep. Not a wink. We've waited so long.'

And what can I do after that, he thought, except pray maybe. She looked away from him. Suddenly the hand that had laid so gently on his arm stiffened and pinched.

'Well!' she said. 'Will you look at that.' He followed her gaze, but all he could see was a man and a woman leaving a pub on the street opposite.

'That's Dickie Purvis's mam and dad,' she said.

He looked bewildered. 'Who?'

'He's in my class,' she said. 'No shoes and stockings and all his clothes in rags, and they can find money for beer.'

She started off from him, but he held on to her. 'Just a minute,' Ford said. 'Where are you off to?'

'To give them a piece of my mind,' said Jessie

'You want me to come with you?'

'You'd be fighting in no time,' she said. 'No, Jack. Leave it to me. I'll fettle them.'

She hurried off and Ford watched her go, shaking his head in reluctant admiration, as Jessie stormed up to Dickie Purvis's parents and called out, 'Just a minute, you two. I want a word with you.' Behind him, Tom's voice said, 'Hard case my sister. Better you than me.'

'Hullo, Tom,' said Ford. 'Where did you spring from?'

His voice was easy, without any suggestion of tension. 'I followed you,' said Tom. 'Didn't mam tell you I wanted a word?'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'She did.' He walked across the promenade to lean against the granite parapet that separated sand and concrete, stared out across the sea, gleaming in the sunlight, the noisy, heaving sea.

Tom Scaton went after him. All his bloody life he thought, he leads and others follow, but things are going to be different this time.

'She told you it was about Bert Mather's widow?' Tom Seaton asked.

'Aye.'

'You didn't make much effort to see me.'

'No need, Tom,' said Ford. 'I can't help you.'

'You were doing all right helping her,' said Tom.

Ford looked at him, fighting for, achieving control.

'You'd better finish it,' he said.

'I saw you in the pub,' said Tom, 'with her brother. You weren't short of a bob or two either.'

'You should know, Tom. You've had your whack,' said Ford.

'Then you went back to his house,' said Tom. 'And don't deny it. I followed you there.'

All Ford said was, 'You seem to have a knack for it.'

'I know all about you, Jack,' said Tom. 'You and her.'

'Tom's the word for you all right,' said Ford. 'Peeping Tom ... If you're after money you've picked a bad time.'

'I don't want your bloody money,' said Tom.

'No?' said Ford. 'That makes a change.'

Tom Seaton said, 'You know what I want, Jack.'

Ford looked away. Thank God Jessie was still letting the Purvises have it.

'Don't tell me you and those mates of yours aren't planning a job,' said Tom, 'because I know better. All I want is a share in it.'

'What do you think we are?' said Ford. 'Bloody Dick Turpins?'

'I don't know, Jack,' said Tom, 'but I'll tell you one thing you're not and that's honest. You can't be. You've always got money.'

Ford said, 'You want to start thieving with your wife the state she's in?'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'I do They told me at the clinic that Mary

needs eggs and milk and a holiday in the country. Our Billy says the same. Eggs and milk and a holiday. You know what Mary needs? She needs money—and I'm going to get it.'

'Tom, I can't,' said Ford. 'It's not just up to me'

'You get me in,' Tom Seaton said, 'or I'll tell our Jessie what I saw.'

Ford's hand moved, motioning him to silence as Jessie came back to them.

'By,' she said, 'I really enjoyed that. Hullo, Tom. What are you doing here?'

'Having a crack with your young man,' said Tom.

'Well you don't look as if it was doing either of you any good,' she said.

'I wouldn't say that, Jessie,' Tom said. 'I wouldn't say that at all.'

Ford said, 'How did you get on with the Purvises?'

'Dickie'll get his boots,' she said.

'Looking out for your kids, were you?' said Tom.

'Don't you start sneering,' said his sister.

'I wasn't,' said Tom. 'Looking out for the folk that need us—that's what we all have to do.' He looked hard at Jack Ford. 'Any way we can,' he said.

■

The countryside round Hexham was real countryside, not sooty trees and a park. Here was rolling hillside covered in grass, clumps of carefully preserved trees, fields ripening as the sun touched them; here were the illustrations from all the storybooks Billy had read as a child and thought of as just a part of fairyland, but this was real. Here were stone-built cottages and at longer intervals the grey stone houses of the rich, for this land was as rich as it was beautiful. Beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep grazing contentedly, converting grass into money ... When he went for a walk, Jack Ford didn't believe in dawdling, and it was with a sigh of relief that Billy heard

him call a halt at last, and sat down beside him on a patch of grass opposite a stream.

'You've got me worn out,' Billy said.

Ford rummaged in the roomy haversack he carried and produced a pair of field glasses, focused them and looked about him. Sheep everywhere he looked, and all prime meat.

'Just a stroll, Billy,' he said. He swung the glasses again towards a farmhouse pleasingly distant from where the sheep grazed.

'Stroll!' said Billy. 'Ten miles if it was a yard.'

'And I thought you were tough,' said Ford.

The glasses swung to a clump of trees beside a winding road; just the place to hide a van.

Billy said, 'So did I, till I started walking with you.'

He looked at the glasses Ford was using. 'Those are nice glasses.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'Present from me captain.'

He handed them to Billy, who looked through them idly, not seeking for targets.

'Oh,' said Billy, 'the war ... The bosses' war.'

'Is that what you call it at the university?' Ford asked.

'We call it that because that was what it was,' said Billy. 'That war was fought for profit, and who makes the profit? Only the bosses.'

'It was a boss that gave me them glasses,' said Ford. 'On the Somme that was. Hit by shrapnel. Ten minutes later he died in my arms.'

'All the same,' said Billy, 'his class were—'

'Wait, Billy,' said Ford. 'Let me finish. He said something before he died and it's puzzled me ever since. An educated chap like you could perhaps explain it to me.'

Billy pulled a face at him.

'Night it was,' said Ford. 'Whizz bangs coming over, flares going up, and he's coughing his guts out. Then all of a sudden he stops and says to me: "What the hell am I doing here,

sergeant? I said I'd be at the Savile." Then he died. Now tell me this, will you? What's the Savile?'

'It's a club,' said Billy.

'Oh,' said Ford, 'like the Oddfellows?'

'No,' said Billy, 'not really. It's a gentleman's club.' He broke off and glared suspiciously at Ford. 'You're pulling my leg.'

'He was a boss,' said Ford. 'Worth thousands. But he died at Wipers—and I didn't—and where's the profit in that?'

'You like the bosses, do you?' said Billy.

'I wouldn't mind being one.'

He took the glasses back from Billy and looked down to a cornfield from which a pheasant was whirring and clattering its way into the sky. Give it a while more, and that would be good eating.

'You'd do better to fight for your own class,' Billy said.

'I've had me whack of fighting,' said Ford. 'Anyway, I've got no time for politics.'

'Why not?' said Billy.

'Because politics is all bosses too,' said Ford. 'So far as I'm concerned a Tory's a boss that goes to church, and a Liberal's a boss that goes to chapel.'

'There's another party, Jack,' said Billy.

'The Socialists,' said Ford and Billy nodded.

'Man, what chance have they got?' said Ford. 'The bosses could chew them up and spit them out.'

'What about the last election?' said Billy. 'You were there, throwing your medals about.' Ford smiled. 'The Labour Party will get stronger and so will the unions.'

'The unions!' said Ford. 'I've been locked out for months—and there's nowt the unions can do to stop it.'

'They survived, Jack,' said Billy, 'and they'll go on fighting—and there's more than six million of you, remember.'

'You seem to know a hell of a lot about it,' said Ford.

'I haven't forgotten where I come from,' said Billy. 'I never will. You shouldn't either, Jack.'

'Fat chance I've got of forgetting,' said Ford. 'Anyway why pick on me? Why not your da—or Tom?'

'Dad's done his share, but he's past it. You know he is—and Tom thinks of nobody but himself.'

'You're wrong there, kidder,' said Ford, and he said it without bitterness.

Billy said, 'Yes. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.'

'What chance has Mary got?' Ford asked.

'If she'd been a boss's wife—all the chance in the world—as it is . . .'

'She's dying?'

Billy said, 'I think so. And God knows I've seen enough of them.' His voice became more urgent. 'Jack—can't you see—it's people like Mary I want you to fight for.'

'Why me, bonny lad?' Ford asked.

'Because you're a leader, Jack. People follow you. And you've got brains,' said Billy. 'If you'd had your proper chance—'

Ford said, 'I'd have given me sergeant me field glasses and died on the Somme.'

'Will you at least think about it, Jack?' Billy persisted. 'Talk it over with Jessie.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I didn't think Jessie would be far away when politics came up . . . Think about what, man?'

'Going to your branch meeting,' said Billy. 'Speak up. I'd help you—and so would Jessie. I know she would.'

'And that would be fighting back?' said Ford.

'It would be one way,' said Billy. 'I think it would be the best way.'

As he spoke Ford picked up the field glasses once more to follow the progress of a policeman on a bicycle coming down past the trees towards him, then turning away to follow a larger road and passing from sight. One fat policeman on a bicycle.

'No,' said Ford. 'I'll fight when I must—but I don't want an audience.'

'Well at least talk to Jessie about it,' said Billy.

'All right,' said Ford. 'I'll talk to Jessie.' He grinned. 'That'll be a change. Most of the time Jessie talks to me.'

He put the field glasses back in the haversack and took out a couple of bottles of beer and some sandwiches, opened the wrapping of the sandwiches and offered one to Billy.

'What are they?' said Billy.

'Mutton.'

Billy looked round at the sheep that bleated and grazed in their direction.

'Well at least that's appropriate,' he said.

'Appropriate?' said Ford. 'Aye ... I think you're right.'

•

It was baking day and Bella was giving her dough a good pounding. She wanted this batch to rise first time, what with flour the price it was. By the window Jessie sat reading to the background of the slap and thump of pounded dough and her mother's unending conversation.

'So I got a couple of bones from the butcher's,' said Bella, 'and a few vegetables and I made a big pan of soup.'

Jessie continued to read.

'I know it's hot weather, but soup's always filling,' said Bella, and became aware that she had lost her audience.

'Jessie?'

'Yes, mother?' said Jessie and went on reading.

'I said soup's filling,' said Bella.

'Yes, mother.'

'And I thought seeing it was the big pan I could put some in that blue jug we got when your Auntie Nellie died and I could pop round and see if Mary might fancy a drop. What do you say?'

Jessie said, 'I didn't say anything, mother. I'm trying to read.'

'And reading's more important than our Mary?' said Bella.

'This reading might be.'

Bella said, horrified, 'Jessie!' and Jessie put down her book.

'I'm sorry, mother,' she said. 'Of course give Mary some soup.'

'You know you always say I should ask you first –' said Bella.

'You give her it, mam,' said Jessie. 'Take it over and see she drinks it.' She picked up the book again. Bella opened her mouth to speak, then sighed just as the yard door banged and Bill Seaton came in another audience.

'Well, mother,' said Bill, then looked at his daughter. 'Well Jessie.'

'Hullo, pet,' said Bella. 'Been to the Lodge meeting?'

'Aye,' said Bill.

'Our Tom there?' said Bella, and Bill nodded. 'Did he say how Mary was?'

'Aye,' said Bill. 'She's bad, mother.'

Bella said, 'I'm taking her over some soup.'

'Do her good,' said Bill, then sat down in the Windsor-backed chair that was earmarked as his own, and began to unlace his boots. 'What are you reading, lass?' he asked.

'It's a book of our Billy's,' said Jess and held it up to him.

Bill Seaton looked at it, and read with difficulty: 'Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: the *Communist Manifesto*.'

'That's never a medical book?' said Bella.

'No, mam,' said Jessie. 'Politics.'

'Communists, Bella,' said Bill. 'Comrades. Fellow-workers. Like they have in Russia.'

'Them fellers that shot their king?' said Bella.

'That's right,' said Jessie.

'Our Billy wants to start shooting kings?' said Bella, appalled.

'No, mam,' said Jessie. 'He wants to stop our Mary dying—and so do I.'

'And shooting people's the way to do it?' asked Bill.

His daughter said, 'It might be the only way, dad.'

■

They had left the stream and followed the path that led past a clump of trees, then on to the main road and a brisk

walk to the station. The road had been empty until suddenly the fat policeman, still patrolling on his bicycle, came up behind them.

'Hey you two,' the policeman bawled. 'Just a minute.' They stopped, and the policeman dismounted and wheeled his bike towards them. 'Where do you think you're off to then?'

'Hexham,' said Ford. He could feel the anger rising inside him. It wasn't his fault his clothes were shabby, like Billy he'd done his best to keep them neat. But the policeman saw only the shabbiness and a chance to bully a couple of men on the road. 'Go easy,' he told himself. 'Don't start anything. You've got work to do here when the clouds come.'

The policeman was saying, 'When you get there, mind you keep on going. We don't want tramps here. The doss houses are all full anyway.'

Ford was about to answer with suitable humility—at least at first—when Billy spoke.

'I beg your pardon, officer?' And his voice was so upper class that Ford for a second found himself gawping like an idiot, before his features achieved impassivity.

'And don't come the cheeky with me,' said the policeman.

'Come the cheeky?' said Billy. 'What on earth are you talking about?' He turned to Ford. 'It's like another language here. It really is. My good man, what can have possibly persuaded you that we are tramps?'

'Well,' said the policeman, 'you're on the road.'

'But of course we are,' said Billy. 'We have been walking all day. Observing birds, officer. The correct expression is ornithology—but for you observing birds will do.' The policeman looked at their clothes and Billy continued. 'And spare us the comment that we are shabbily dressed. We'd hardly go bird-watching in our dinner jackets.'

But the policeman was still not quite convinced. 'I thought you needed glasses for that bird watching business, sir.'

Bill sighed heavily, the sigh of a man whose patience is stretched to breaking point.

'Indeed we do,' he said. He unslung the haversack which it was his turn to carry and took out the field glasses. 'These glasses.'

He held them out to the policeman. Screwed into the leather of the case was a neat brass disc with the name Captain P. J. B. Manners inscribed.

'I'm very sorry, sir,' said the policeman. 'I didn't realise—'

Billy said, 'Well, I trust you realise now.'

'Yes, sir,' said the policeman. 'Of course. I'm sorry, captain. Excuse me.' He mounted his bicycle and rode ponderously away. Both Billy and Ford watched until he was out of earshot, then Ford collapsed with laughter.

'Billy, man,' he said, 'that was marvellous,' and mimicked the policeman. 'Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir,' he said, then looked up. Billy wasn't laughing. 'What's up?' said Ford.

'The whole bloody system. That's what's up. All I had to do was to put on a posh voice and the coppers start saluting. If I couldn't have done a voice like that we might have been arrested for vagrancy.'

Ford was puzzled. 'That's what I'm saying,' he said. 'It was bloody marvellous.'

'What *I'm* saying is—it's wrong,' said Billy.

'What's wrong with it?' Ford asked.

'The fact that you accepted it,' Billy said. 'You. Of all people.'

'No,' said Ford.

'Go on,' said Billy. 'Tell me. If I hadn't been able to play Lord Muck—what would you have done?'

'Belted him,' said Ford at his most matter of fact, and Billy smiled.

'Aye,' he said, 'I believe you would. *And* left me to patch him up.'

'Bit of practice for you,' said Ford, then asked, 'Where'd you learn to talk posh?'

'The chap next to me in the path lab,' said Billy. 'Nanny, governess, prep school and public school. He's had the lot.'

'And he talks to you?'

'He doesn't even look at me. Him and his mates don't know I'm there. But I am, Jack. I am there and sometimes it seems like a miracle. If you knew the—'

'Keep it for the train, Billy,' said Ford. 'If we don't look sharp we'll miss it.'

They slogged on towards the station and Billy said, 'You're coming back to see Jessie?'

'No,' said Jack, 'not tonight. There's a mate of mine I've got to see.'

■

His mate was surprised to see him.

'Oh,' she said. 'It's you.'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'Matt about?'

'No,' said Dolly. 'They're all out. He said he'd be at the pub later on.'

'Thanks,' said Ford and turned away. At once her hand reached out and touched his arm.

'I didn't say you couldn't come in,' said Dolly. 'If you wanted to.'

'I want to all right but—'

'You'd better come in then,' said Dolly.

•

Mary lay in her bed while Bella fed her soup and Jessie watched. It was a poor bedroom, and a battered one, but it was still spotless. When Mary's strength had given out, Tom had taken over. The paintwork scrubbed, the brass bedstead gleaming, but to Mary this was just another reproach. Tom shouldn't have to do this; this was women's work—her work.

'Come on, me bairn,' said Bella. 'Just another spoonful. Just to please me.'

It was good broth and Mary knew it had been made with love, but even so she struggled to swallow it, inevitably gagged on it and began to cough. The coughing was an aching, heart-rending sound.

'I'm sorry, Mrs. Seaton,' Mary said at last. 'I couldn't. I just couldn't.'

'Don't take on, pet,' said Bella. 'You've done champion. Hasn't she, Jessie?'

'Of course she has,' said Jessie, who was aware at once of the lack of conviction in her voice. It was as if she had found herself incapable of soothing a frightened child, but the woman in the bed didn't notice.

'I'm feeling better,' said Mary. 'I'll be up soon. You'll see.'

Behind Mary, unseen by her, Bella looked across at Jessie, and shook her head. Jessie tried again.

'Well, of course, you will,' she said 'But you'll have to take care of yourself for a bit you know. Get yourself really strong.'

'It's just—I get tired,' said Mary.

'You're bound to,' said Jessie, 'with a cough like you've got.'

As she spoke Tom and Billy came in: Tom winced at the word 'cough' but said nothing till he walked across to the bed and kissed his wife.

'I've brought our Billy to see you.'

Billy went softly to Mary, the professional manner already apparent, the deft hands, the soft voice.

'Hullo, Mary,' he said and looked at the soup plate. 'Am I interrupting your supper?'

As he spoke, his hands went first to her forehead and then to her pulse.

'No,' said Mary. 'I'd finished.'

'How's the cough?'

She struggled to sit up, but he pressed her back to the pillows.

'Better,' she said. 'Honest.'

'Any blood with it?'

'No,' said Mary.

He looked at her, with that special doctor's look that said as plain as words, don't you lie to me, my girl.

'Well a bit,' she said. 'But I mean with a bad cough like that there's bound to be a bit.'

The deft hands tucked sheets and blankets around her

'You just lie there and get better,' said Billy.

It was the last thing that Mary wanted to do. She wanted to be up and about, to be a wife and a mother.

'It's the bairn, you see,' she said at last. 'I'm worried about the bairn.'

'Mam and Jess'll take care of him,' said Billy. 'You know that, Mary, so don't fret. The more you fret, the longer it'll take to get well.'

But how can I help fretting? she thought. It's me that should be taking care of Tommy. He's my bairn. Not Mam's, not Jessie's But she said nothing.

Billy moved over to Jessie, who said at once, 'Did Jack come with you?'

'No,' said Billy. 'He had to stop off and see a mate of his.'

Behind them, unseen, Tom let out his breath in a noiseless sigh.

*

They had gone mad again; that was the only explanation for it. The way they made love was in itself a kind of madness—a defiance of everything that was in store for both of them, an enjoyment of the present that was rapidly becoming an absolute need. Matt was out, her mother and father visiting relatives, and so they had gone up to her bedroom. Her hunger was, if anything, even more demanding than the first time. He had taught her things she had never even dreamed had existed but she had absorbed them with a practical application that delighted him. Never had she made love naked with her husband as she did with him, but even that was a heightening of pleasure, not a source of embarrassment to her: her demands matched his own till at last she said, 'You still haven't lost your appetite.'

Ford smiled as she stretched beside him, as contented and relaxed as a cat before the fire, a cat which has just finished its milk.

'Neither have I, thank God,' she said, and then, 'Suppose I get pregnant?'

'Then we'll get married,' said Ford.

'And suppose I don't?'

'Then we won't.'

'Thanks very much,' said Dolly.

He wasn't having that. 'You want to marry a bank clerk, remember,' he said.

'And you want to marry a schoolteacher,' she said and returned to her favourite theme. 'We must be mad, the pair of us.'

He reached for her.

'Let's hope we both get what we want,' he said.

'Maybe we've got that already,' said Dolly, but for once Ford was too engrossed to listen.

*

In the pub Matt sat waiting with Paddy Boyle and Charlie Stobbs.

'We shouldn't have met here,' said Matt and turned to Stobbs. 'You and your best beer for miles. Didn't Jack say we needed a change of pub?'

'Stop worrying, man,' said Stobbs. 'I've had this half in my hands for the last twenty minutes. That barmaid hasn't even looked at us. I'll get three more.' He stood up and Matt said, 'No. Better wait for Jack.' His voice was a corporal's voice; Charlie Stobbs sat down again.

'I wonder what's keeping him,' said Paddy Boyle. And as he said it, Jack Ford came in.

'About bloody time,' said Charlie Stobbs.

Ford said angrily, 'You might give me a chance to apologise before you start.'

Overt anger in Ford was a new experience for Charlie Stobbs. Ford, so long as he had known him, had always been contained; that was what made him so dangerous.

'Take it easy, man,' said Stobbs. 'I only meant I was thirsty.'

He went to the bar, came back with four halves of bitter, and they got down to business.

'You've been there?' Paddy Boyle asked.

'Aye,' said Ford. 'Today.'

He hesitated, and Matt said impatiently, 'Well?'

'We can take four easy,' said Ford.

'Four?' said Paddy Boyle, and could not hide the astonishment in his voice.

'Keep your voice down,' Ford said, then added, 'I've said we can take four.'

'But we've never chanced more than two,' said Charlie Stobbs.

'There's hundreds of them there,' said Ford. 'Maybe thousands.'

'All the same, Jack, there's only four of us.'

'We can get another man,' said Ford.

The other three looked at each other, doubtful, uneasy. Without a sign from any of them, Matt was elected spokesman.

'It's not that easy, Jack,' he said.

'Why not?' said Ford.

Matt said, 'Whoever it is—we've got to be able to trust him. I mean with us it was different –all being in B Company – knowing each other going on trench raids together.'

Paddy Boyle said, 'Matt's right you know, Jack.'

Jack Ford yawned. The yawn seemed to express contempt for the timidity of his fellows, and their stupidity in turning down the chance to make some real money.

'Suit yourself,' he said at once. 'But they're all prime meat what I saw. We'll clean up—and another thing, the way things are going this could be our last job. My last job anyway.'

Paddy Boyle said, 'But Jack, what the hell for?'

'The luck won't last for ever,' said Ford. 'It's getting more dangerous every time.'

'But how are we going to manage?' said Charlie Stobbs.

'I was thinking of something else,' said Ford.

'That's all right then,' said Charlie Stobbs.

Ford thought: it's incredible. They don't even ask what the something else is. Billy my boy, if these fellows go hungry I'll tell them it was all your fault, and you can tell them all about socialism.

Aloud he said, 'Wait till you hear what it is. Now then, are we going for four or not?'

'Do you know a chap?' Paddy Boyle asked, and Ford nodded.

'Who is he?' asked Stobbs.

Ford said, 'If things go right he'll be my brother-in-law. Tom Seaton—he's a miner—when he gets the chance to work.'

'Army?' Matt asked.

Trust him to ask the tricky one, thought Ford.

'Aye,' he said.

'What regiment?' Paddy Boyle asked.

'Ours,' said Ford, then took a deep breath. There'd be trouble over this. 'Ninth Battalion,' he said.

'Ninth?' said Matt. 'They never even went to France. What the hell does he know about trench raids?'

'He'll be all right, Matt,' said Ford. 'I promise.'

'He bloody better be all right,' said Matt.

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I'll tell him that meself.'

*

Billy lit the gas as Jessie took off her coat in the Seatons' kitchen. It was good to be home, to get away from the oppressive atmosphere of Mary's sickness. At once she reproached herself; Tom was her brother and she loved him, Mary the sweetest of sisters-in-law. It was not her sickness Jessie resented, it was the helplessness it brought with it. She hated any situation which left her helpless.

'If mam stays at our Tom's you'll have to get your own breakfast—and dad's,' she said. 'I don't suppose he'll be up in time for what I'm cooking.'

'I'll manage,' said Billy. 'I've managed before.'

'Your digs?' she asked and Billy nodded. 'What are they like?'

He grinned. 'A real home from home,' he said. 'If you live in a pigsty.'

'It's been rough, I know,' his sister said. 'But once you qualify —it's only two more years.'

Billy said, 'Don't worry, sis, I'll stick it out.'

'Course you will,' she said and hugged him quickly. This was a situation she could handle. 'How was the hike?'

'Great,' said Billy.

'Did Jack enjoy it?' she asked.

Billy said, 'He did that. We talked all the time.'

'What about?'

'Him,' said Billy, 'his union ... fighting back.'

'What did he say?' Jessie asked.

'He said he'd think about it,' said Billy and Jessie smiled.

'He always does,' she said.

'He's got brains you know, sis,' said Billy.

'He's the brightest one of the lot of us,' said Jessie.

'If only he'd bother to use them.'

The door to the back yard opened, and Tom came in. 'Who's the brightest one?' he asked.

'We were talking about Jack Ford,' said Billy.

'Seems to me you two never talk about anything else,' said Tom, then caught the gleam in his sister's eye. 'Sorry, sis,' he said, 'I didn't mean anything.'

Jessie went to the larder and came back with some eggs in a paper bag and milk in a can.

'There you are,' she said.

'Thanks, Jess,' said Tom.

'Mam'll know how to do the eggs,' said Jessie. 'Tell her if Mary doesn't fancy them any other way to try making a custard.'

'Right,' said Tom. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am.'

'Then stop making remarks about my young man,' said Jessie, then broke off at the sound of footsteps outside.

'Who's that?' said Tom. 'Da?'

'Dad's in bed,' said Jessie as Jack's voice called out from outside, 'Anybody home?'

'Oh—it's Jack,' said Jessie. 'Come on in.'

Her brother Tom noticed how her features softened at the very sound of Ford's voice. Once Mary's face had changed like that at the sight of him, coming home from work...

Ford came in and said at once, 'Hullo, Tom. I was just on me way to find you.'

'At this time of night?' said Jessie, and looked at the kitchen clock. It was after ten.

'There's a mate of mine and me going fishing,' said Ford. 'We're looking for somebody to give us a hand with his boat so I suggested you.'

'What for?' said Jessie. 'You know how poorly his wife is.'

'Ten bob,' said Ford. 'That's what for. And mebbee a few fish as well. Are you on?'

'Am I?' said Tom. 'I'll just get these things back to Mary—' Already he was on his way to the door.

'Whoa, lad,' said Ford. 'There's plenty of time. I'll see you at the corner of Dock Street in half an hour.'

'All right, Jack,' said Tom, then added, 'You won't regret this. Honestly you won't.' He turned to Jessie. 'I'll be off then, Jessie—and thanks—you an'all, Jack.' And then he was gone.

Billy said, 'No fishing for medical students, I suppose?'

'Sorry,' said Ford, 'the boat only holds three.'

Billy grinned. 'I'd better be off to bed then,' he said. 'A growing lad like me needs his rest.' He kissed his sister. 'Goodnight, Jack,' he said.

'Our Billy's awful,' said Jessie, and when Ford looked closer he could see that she was blushing.

'Your Billy's all right,' said Ford, 'and so's your Tom.'

'It seemed like an awful lot of fuss for a night's fishing,' said Jessie.

Ford put his arms about her, a friendly, almost brotherly gesture, no more.

'It's money in his pocket, lass,' he said, 'money he's worked

for. The dignity of labour. You and Billy know all about that.'

'Billy tells me he was on to you all day,' she said.

'Never stopped,' said Ford. 'He was worse than you.' She turned inside his arm to look up into his face.

'Am I that bad?' she asked, and put her arms around him.

'You know I didn't mean it,' he said.

'We're not on the promenade now, Jack,' she said. 'You can kiss me. Nobody'll see you.'

Very gently he kissed her, a friendly, almost a brotherly kiss.

'You're still not friends with me, are you?' she asked.

'What are you on about?' said Ford.

'You know what I'm on about,' Jessie said. 'That day on the sands—I still don't think it's right Jack—how can I—the way I was brought up—but if you really want to—'

Ford kissed her again, a lover's kiss.

'We'll wait,' he said and continued to hold her. 'For a school-teacher you've got a lot to learn.'

'Have I?' she asked.

'It's not what I want,' he said. 'It's what *we* want.'

'You're still angry,' she said.

'If I am,' said Ford, 'I've no right to be.' He kissed her again, a friendly almost brotherly kiss. 'I'd better be off or I'll miss the fishing.'

11

Tom waited anxiously at the corner of Dock Street. He still couldn't believe his luck, couldn't be quite sure that Ford wasn't fobbing him off, sending him to the wrong place, or maybe at the wrong time, then making out tomorrow it was all his own fault for getting the instructions wrong, but at that moment Ford came strolling up as if he had all the time in the world.

'I thought you were never coming,' said Tom. Then: 'What'll we be doing, Jack?'

'Stealing sheep,' said Ford.

'What? But how—'

'I'll tell you on the way,' said Ford. 'There's something else you've got to know first.'

Tom waited.

'I'm taking you because of Mary,' said Ford. 'No other reason.'

'Mary's the only reason I want to go,' said Tom.

'Aye,' said Ford, 'I realise that now. First off I thought it was beer money. If it had been I'd have given you a belting and you could tell Jessie what you like. Understand that?'

'Aye,' said Tom, 'I understand it. But you've no cause to sit in judgement Not after what you've been up to.'

'I'm not denying it,' said Ford.

Tom said angrily, 'Jessie's my sister and I'm fond of her—and to watch you with that tart—but I'm not a Peeping Tom and I'm not a blackmailer either. I said I'd have told Jessie to get in on this job, but I'd never have told her. Not even if you'd

turned us down—but that wasn't for your sake, Jack—it was for hers.'

In the lamplight Ford could see the anger and bewilderment in Tom's face, but all he said was, 'You'll do, Tom. You'll do.' Then a butcher's van rattled down the street, Matt Headley at the wheel.

'Ha-way then, man. We're off.' He climbed into the back of the van then hauled Tom in, and they began the rattling journey to Hexham.

*

It was what Captain Manners used to call 'the dark of the moon': a moon almost totally obscured by cloud, giving them just enough light to see and stalk their target. They were very near the place where he and Billy had eaten their sandwiches. The van coasted down the uneven path, they got out at last and pushed it behind the convenient clump of trees. Once under cover they began to unload the equipment, first an old tin can full of soot—there was always plenty of soot to be had in Gallowshield.

Tom Scaton said, 'What's this? Nigger minstrels?'

Paddy Boyle said, 'Shut up and get it on.'

As Tom smeared his face with it, Charlie Stobbs produced a bundle of miner's pick handles. They were about 18 inches long and made very effective weapons. Each man took one.

Ford said, 'Now mind, Tom, we don't use these unless we have to—and even then we don't hit too hard.'

'All right,' said Tom. 'I understand.'

'Mind you do,' said Charlie Stobbs. It was obvious that Tom had not yet been accepted into this tightly knit group, but Ford continued as if there were no doubts, no worries. 'You ready, Paddy?' he asked.

'Aye,' said Boyle and produced a butcher's knife, long and razor sharp.

Matt Headley reached into the van once more and produced a bundle of clippy mats, a kind of rug made out of any old,

discarded clothing available, suits, jerseys, shirts, all cut into strips and made into a patterned fabric. He handed these to Ford and then produced five buckets from the van, one for each of them.

Tom took his and asked, 'What's this for?'

'Blood,' said Paddy Boyle, 'and mind you don't spill any.'

They moved off to where the sheep were sleeping, progressing silently up the narrow road, and crawling towards a dry stone wall. Not one man made a sound as they reached the wall and clambered over, moved in on the drowsy flock. Ford felt a flood of relief: it looked as if Tom Seaton was going to be all right. The men moved on towards a group detached from the main herd, a group of seven or eight, any of which would do. They waited as Paddy Boyle, the expert, selected his targets and indicated them by pointing.

Ford and Charlie Stobbs ran up on the first of the sheep, and grabbed it by the horns, Ford holding on to it as Stobbs stretched a mat beneath it, then grabbed its back legs and lifted it up over a bucket. The sheep was bleating furiously, waking the whole herd, but Matt Headley and Tom had somehow penned their other three targets and there would be time to spare before the bellowing flock woke the farmer. Paddy Boyle moved in with the knife. Death came quickly, though it never comes quickly enough, and Stobbs and Ford held it over the bucket, watched as its life blood drained into it. Not for the first time Ford marvelled at the noise that the blood from a severed artery can make: as it pulsed into the bucket it sounded like falling rain. At its death they laid it on the mat and Charlie Stobbs wrapped it up in a neat parcel, carried it to the dry stone wall. As he did so, Ford and Matt Headley grabbed the next sheep, Paddy moved in, and Tom held the bucket in place. The smell of the blood was sickening, the mere sight of what Paddy Boyle was doing enough to turn his stomach, but Tom continued to hold the bucket exactly in place.

I was right, thought Ford, he'll do. Next time it was Ford

and Tom who grabbed the sheep as Matt parcelled up the one just killed and carried it off to the dry stone wall.

They could have taken more. Charlie Stobbs was all for making it half a dozen at least, but the sheep were bleating now louder than ever. Sooner or later the farmer must hear them and come investigating. If he did, he'd bring dogs with him, and maybe a shotgun as well. It was time to go...

As Charlie Stobbs heaved a sheep into the van Tom came up carrying two buckets filled with blood.

'All right?' said Charlie.

'I'm fine,' said Tom.

Charlie Stobbs grinned. 'No you're not, kidder,' he said. 'But you'll get used to it.'

Paddy Boyle heaved his sheep into the van.

'Where's the others?' said Charlie.

'Just coming,' Paddy said and pushed his sheep further in, then turned to Tom and said, 'Bit of company for you on the way home.'

Ford and Matt Headley came up at last and loaded in their sheep.

'Right,' Charlie Stobbs said. 'Let's away.'

But Ford said, 'We'll check first. Pick handles?'

They all showed the pick handles they had.

'Mats,' said Ford.

'All in the van,' Matt Headley said. 'I counted them.'

'Buckets,' said Ford.

'Two here,' said Paddy Boyle, 'and two in the van. Where the hell's the other one?'

'It was my fault,' said Tom Seaton. 'I forgot it.'

Paddy Boyle said, 'You'd better go back for it, kidder,' then wiped his knife on the edge of a clippy mat and wrapped it in sacking once more; as Tom went back for the missing bucket, the others pushed the van from behind the shelter of the trees.

To be alone in the moonlight was eerie, even frightening, and to pick up a bucket of blood made him think of the monster picture he'd seen not long ago. Frankenstein was it? Or

Dracula? It was hard to believe that quite recently he'd been in the presence of death, even violent death, rendered no less palatable by the use of such homely objects as mats and buckets, rendered perhaps even more frightening. When the van's engine finally caught and fired the sound was a relief to him. He held the bucket carefully and hurried towards the rhythmic, friendly noise...

To the policeman on the road the noise was an enigma. He knew his countryside, knew the ones with cars, knew too that they rarely if ever used that particular lane. Courting couple maybe. The local magistrates were dead against courting couples. He put his head down and pedalled furiously. As he rounded a corner he could see the dark outline of the van and a man hurrying towards it, a man carrying of all things a bucket. The policeman yelled to him to stop but the man ran even faster. Head down, pedalling furiously the policeman overtook him at last, leaped from his bicycle, and brought him down in a flying tackle. Lying heavily on top of Tom he called out, 'Help! Help!'

Jack Ford leapt from the van, in his hands a short pick handle; Matt Headley followed. The policeman was too busy punching Tom Seaton to know of their arrival until Ford tipped his helmet forward then swung the pick handle like a club on the exposed head. The policeman stopped punching and they dragged him away from Tom Seaton. Matt Headley looked at the unconscious policeman who was covered in blood.

'Christ,' he said, 'you've killed him.'

'Don't be daft,' said Ford. 'It was sheep we killed.' He knelt beside Tom. 'Get up, Tom,' he said, 'get up, man,' but Tom didn't move. Carefully Ford turned the blood-soaked body over. Tom had banged his head against a stone and that wound too was bleeding sluggishly.

Ford hooked the now empty bucket over his arm, and said to Matt Headley, 'Take his legs. We can't hang about here.'

As they carried him to the van a dog began barking hysterically, then another answered. They loaded Tom into the

back of the van, Matt scrambled into the driving seat and they started at once as dogs from the farm streaked across the grassland towards them, and the farmer with a coat over his nightgown let loose with a 12 bore.

*

The hammering on the back door had an insistent rhythm that sooner or later could not be denied, and Billy and Jessie came downstairs at last, their top coats over their night clothes.

'Who on earth,' said Jessie. 'It's three in the morning.'

Billy went out and she could hear the rumble of men's voices outside, then Billy and Jack came in, carrying Tom, and she could hear too the sound of a van driving away.

'Jack,' said Jessie. 'What on earth . . .? Is he drunk?' Then she saw the blood on his clothes and gasped.

'Don't worry,' said Ford. 'It's not as bad as it looks.' Then to Billy, 'You'd better take a look at him.' Between them they managed to put Tom on the kitchen table, then Billy bent over him.

'Did the boat have an accident?' asked Jessie.

'Boat?' said Ford. 'Oh aye.'

'But what happened?' she asked. 'He's covered in blood.'

'Most of it's not his,' said Ford.

Billy looked up from Tom's unconscious body. 'He's concussed,' he said. 'We'll have to get a doctor.'

'No,' said Ford.

Billy said, 'This could be serious, Jack.'

'It'll be more serious if we get a doctor,' said Ford. 'Couldn't you treat him?'

'I—don't know. If it's mild—yes. But he might need hospital.'

'Well, of course he does,' said Jessie. 'I'll just get dressed and telephone for an ambulance.'

She moved away but Ford took her arm and turned her to face him. 'We weren't catching fish tonight, Jessie,' he said. 'we were catching sheep . . . stealing sheep.'

'You were what?' said Jessie.'

Ford turned to Billy.

'That copper you talked to nearly caught Tom, only I did belt him after all. Laid him out. If Tom goes to hospital he may go to prison an'all—along with the rest of us.'

For once he found it impossible to read the expression on her face.

Billy said, 'Get some water,' and Ford went off into the tiny scullery, came back with a basin and some clean rags. Billy took them without a word and got to work.

'So that was the odd jobs you were talking about,' said Jessie.

Stolidly Ford said, 'That was it.'

'Stealing,' said Jessie.

Ford said, 'I told your Tom it was like Dick Turpin. It was more like bloody Robin Hood. Rob the rich to feed the poor.'

'You didn't sell it?'

'A bit,' said Ford, 'for beer money. The rest we gave away. Tom was going to sell his share though.'

'For Mary?' Jessie asked.

'That's right,' said Ford.

Jessie said, 'How long—how long have you been doing this?'

'Ever since the lock-out,' said Ford.

Billy, still working on Tom, said without looking up: 'But how on earth did you get away with it?'

'I planned it, Billy,' said Ford. 'Like the army. Trench raids.'

'But all the blood and guts and stuff -surely they could trace you,' Billy said.

Even at that point Ford could not help smiling at the thought that so intelligent a lad could be so naive.

'Buckets and clippy mats for the blood,' he said, 'and the guts all went into the North Sea. Along with the fleeces ... If the fish round here could knit they'd all wear woolly jumpers.'

'And you planned it all?' asked Jessie.

There was no point in denying it.

'Yes,' he said 'I did. One of us is a left-footer.* He's got

* Catholic.

seven kids. Do you think I'd stand by and let them starve?'

'Oh Jack,' she said, 'I think that's marvellous.'

For once the mask slipped and he goggled like an idiot.

'You do?' he said.

Jessie said, 'The bosses have robbed us blind for years and when they set up a soup kitchen we're supposed to tug our forelocks and say, "God bless the squire and his relations, and keep us in our proper stations", and even the dish-water soup they give us has been paid for with our own sweat ... only you didn't wait for charity—you went and took back what belonged to us—and you did it with style.' She chuckled. 'Trust you. That isn't thieving, Jack it's restitution. God bless you. I'm proud of you. I'm only sorry you didn't manage it tonight.'

He was at once relieved and indignant.

'Not manage it?' he said. 'Of course we managed. Your Tom will get his share.' Then to Billy, 'Can you do it, lad?'

'I think so,' said Billy. 'It'll be a risk—'

'I told him that when he asked to join,' said Ford

Jessie said, 'Is that why Tom was looking for Matt Headley's sister? Is she in on it?'

Trust Jessie, he thought, to ask the tricky one. The only way was to keep on going like a tank.

'There's nobody in on it,' he said, 'but the ones that did it. And you. And Billy.'

That pleased her.

'And it's going to stay like that,' said Billy.

'Well, of course,' said Jessie.

'Dad's upstairs,' said Billy. 'Thank God you didn't wake him. You know how he talks when he's had a few pints—and mam.'

'Don't tell them,' said Ford.

'How can I help it?' said Billy. 'They'll see Tom.'

But his sister was the better conspirator after all.

'The boat accident, you daft'un,' she said.

'All right,' said Billy. 'The boat accident ... and not a word from you either, sis.'

'Me?' said Jessie. 'I like that. You don't suppose I'd turn in my own brothers, do you?' She put her arm round Ford's waist. 'Not to mention my husband.'

Swords and Pick Handles

12

There was still no work. There hadn't been work for months. Whether it was a strike or a lock-out the net result was the same; there was nothing to do, no money coming in. The men felt it worst. For most of them it was a life of enforced idleness that was the subtlest form of torture to men who had been used to working with their hands and their brains, producing, proud of what they had produced, proud of the wage packets they took home every week, money earned for work done. Now all they could do was hang about street corners and watch their hands soften day by day.

Everywhere in Gallowshield it was the same. Men idle, men hanging about, men waiting for any excitement to take their minds away from the boredom of idleness. A woman quarrelling with a coal cart driver because his cart had blackened her sheets put out to dry in the back lane, a dog fight, even a cat fight could attract a crowd. There was nothing to do. Unless of course you went to the slag heap or down to the beach looking for coal. Because you had to have coal; coal was the only fuel there was for hot water, for cooking: you had to have it even in that long hot summer, if you were going to eat. And if there wasn't money to buy it you had to look for it. A slag heap was the harder work, but it was the more rewarding. Sometimes there were treasures to be found on the slag heap, great lumps of coal with hardly any stone in it at all. You picked it up and put it in your sack before somebody grabbed it. And when your sack was full you slung it over your shoulder and carried it home. If you were lucky, you had the wreck of a bicycle to balance the sack on, but most of them

weren't lucky ... Sea coal was harder to find, but at least you were on the beach, soothed by the sound of the summer sea, and if you were not lucky with the coal at least there was driftwood and perhaps even a windfall, a lost penny or sixpence that had fallen from somebody's pocket.

But as the strike went on men haunted the slag heaps and beaches less and less. They were tired and listless and their strength just wasn't up to humping a full sack any more. They hung around street corners, and back streets, the miners down in the squad position they used in the pits, sitting like that hour after hour, the shipyard workers leaning against walls, apathetic, hands in pockets, waiting for the day they believed more and more would never dawn; the day when the shipyards and the pits would open again. The more energetic ones would walk down to the market place, hang around the stalls of the traders, savour the sight of fish, vegetables, fruit and meat for sale, without any thought of buying. The more lucky ones who had managed to come by a shilling or two would go to the pub and nurse a half pint of beer hour after hour, killing time waiting. The clever ones would go to the library. There were seats in the library, and books to read or newspapers—the racing forecasts carefully blacked out, because following horses was a pleasure, and men on strike had no right to pleasure, but even the clever ones had the same listlessness, the same apathy: perhaps even more, because the clever ones had thought about their condition and could see no end to it.

The women were busy They still had husbands and children to care for, houses to clean. They cleaned them with a kind of thoroughness unthinkable to anyone who had not been brought up in that particular working-class condition. Every week the front door step had to be holy-stoned, the windows cleaned, the kitchen range black-leaded and polished. Every week brought its washing day and baking day, every week the kitchen had to undergo what they called 'a thorough turn-out'. And every day the husband and bairns had to be

fed. Particularly the bairns. For the women it was a species of nightmare. Just finding food was a problem in itself Sometimes a man would own an allotment, and at least there would be fresh vegetables: potatoes, cabbages, leeks, perhaps even a rabbit or two, kept in the hutch for the pot. But mostly they went hungry. Each day brought the realisation that there wasn't enough to eat: each day brought the terrible possibility that there might never be enough to eat.

The children at least had their minds occupied. From nine until twelve and from a quarter to two until quarter past four there was school, and there was no escaping school. The School Boards man, the terror of truants, saw to that, and anyway, school brought its own benefits, a pair of boots from the shoeless children's funds or maybe a ticket for a soup kitchen meal. Jessie watched what was going on around her, and even her combative nature drew closer and closer to despair. 'More like being a nurse than a schoolteacher,' she had once said, and it was still true. She presided over classes of undernourished children, some with rickets, some with sores that wouldn't heal because their bodies were too undernourished to make them heal, and she too heard the first whimper of despair. How could you ask children to learn their multiplication tables, when it took them all their time to stay awake? How could you read to children such stories as the 'Wind in the Willows' with its constant reference to good food? Even to read aloud the contents of the picnic hamper that Ratty and Moley took on their boating expedition was a kind of profanation to children whose basic diet was bread, margarine, and potatoes. To ask them to indulge in physical exercise was a kind of insanity that only a civil servant could have given way to. But the timetable said that there should be P.T. twice a week and P.T. twice a week there was . . .

Bella Seaton pushed a battered pram along the road and paused from time to time to make clucking sounds to its occupant. Young Tommy grinned back at her and waved his fists in appreciation. A good bairn, a real canny bairn, and the

image of his mother. Bella's route took her past the primary school where her daughter taught and long before she reached it she could hear her Jessie's voice. 'One two three four. One two three four. Up up up. Up up up—Leslie Jackson, you're not trying. When I say jump, young man—you jump.'

Bella reached the school—grimy brick and even grimier railings. There was something penal about that school, as if the children had no hope of being released until they had served a full sentence. There was no remission for good conduct. The civil servants had decreed that you stayed there till you were 14, and so you stayed: nine years without the option. Bella moved on with the pram and smiled at her daughter's last words ... 'When I say jump, young man—you jump.' Well it might work with Leslie Jackson, but she doubted whether it would ever work with Jack Ford. She moved on until she could see into the playground in the school—a concreted area where a group of ragged children, jerseys off, were listlessly going through the motions her daughter demanded of them. As she watched, her daughter blew a whistle.

'Now we'll touch our toes,' Jessie said, 'and I want to see everybody go right down Ready?'

Two small boys in leg irons sat with their backs against the schoolyard wall and watched. Rickets, thought Bella. Poor little fellers.

'Arms raise,' said Jessie, and the class lifted their arms, 'and down we go.' The class attempted to touch their toes, with varying degrees of success. Bella noticed that Jessie too was doing the exercises with her class and marvelled, not for the first time, at her daughter's boundless vitality.

'Arms raise—and down we go ... Right down, Leslie Jackson.' She strode impatiently to Leslie—a fat boy at the back, grabbed his neck and pushed him down Bella marvelled too, that there should still be such a person as a fat boy to be seen in Gallowshield. Maybe his parents owned a fish and chip shop.

'And keep those knees straight,' said Jessie.

Bella watched the fat boy struggle with the twin handicaps of gross belly and wobbling knees. Poor little bugger, she said softly. It was obvious that Leslie Jackson was going to touch his toes with his knees straight before the end of the lesson; it was equally obvious that he was going to suffer for it.

Jessie strode impatiently back to her place and as she did so became aware of her mother watching through the railings like a visitor at a zoo. She blew her whistle and the class straightened their backs with relief.

'Get yourselves into four lines,' she said, 'and stand like soldiers.'

At once the children raced to obey. 'Now,' Jessie went on, 'there's one thing soldiers don't do on parade. What is it, Leslie Jackson?'

The fat boy, still scarlet from his exertions, said, 'They don't talk, miss.'

'Mind you don't either,' said Jessie, and ran across to her mother. Still with that unquenchable energy, thought Bella. If only she'd walk, just once. If only she could be a little restful. Jessie stared at her mother through the railings.

'By,' Bella said, 'you'd have made a grand sergeant major.' But Jessie had no time to waste on trivialities.

'You've been to our Tom's,' she said.

'I just thought I'd take the bairn for a walk,' Bella said

Jessie stood on tiptoe and peered into the pram. Protruding above the child's blanket she could see the neck of a bottle of stout.

'As far as the off-licence?' she said.

'Now, Jessie—' said Bella, but again Jessie had no time to waste.

'There's nothing happened to Mary, has there?' she asked.

'She's no different,' said Bella.

'Is our Tom with her?'

'He's after a job,' said Bella.

Jessie spoke at once. She always had an answer, thought Bella, and it was always the right answer. Bella could never

understand why she didn't like this particular characteristic of her daughter.

'Mary shouldn't be left alone,' said Jessie, and then in astonishment—'A job?'

'That's what he said,' said Bella.

'What in the world kind of job could he get round here?' Jessie asked.

There was the sound of smothered laughter from the class in the background. Jessie reached for her whistle, then let it go.

'You get back to Mary, mam,' she said, 'and mind you stay with her till Tom comes.'

Sergeant major's right, thought Bella. We've brought our daughter up to be a sergeant major, and wondered how it could possibly have happened. All that studying maybe, or maybe all schoolteachers were just bossy anyway. Obediently she pushed the pram away. As she went she could hear Jessie's voice upbraiding her class: 'A fine lot of soldiers I've got—talking on parade.' Immediately the laughter ceased.

'Now,' said Jessie, 'let's see if you can march as well as you can talk ... soldiers ... attention! By the left, quick march.'

Then, 'Left, left, left right, left, left, left, left right, left.' The class moved off with a kind of ragged discipline. Inevitably, Leslie Jackson was out of step, but she let it go. Poor fat Leslie had had enough for one day. As they marched as rhythmically as they knew how, she thought of Jack Ford. How would he have drilled soldiers like that? And yet he had drilled soldiers like that. They'd been to the same school, had the same attention, and six, seven, eight years later, they'd gone off to war. Marching towards death with a perfection of discipline that Jack Ford had effortlessly created in them. Her thoughts went back to the time when his guard of honour had thrown their medals down in front of old Pinner. Even the hurling down of the medals had been done rhythmically, by numbers, and when they'd marched off it had been like

the Changing of the Guard. One man's personality had imposed its will on thirty or more, and thirty or more had obeyed without question. It had been the same when he'd done the sheep stealing. He had planned, he had executed, he had led, and the others had followed with unquestioning obedience. A remarkable man, this man she loved, but there were times when he was frightening ... The class filed back into the school and she turned and waved to the two boys with rickets still leaning against the wall. Carefully, using the railings, they clambered to their feet and hobbled after them.

*

Carefully Bella poured the stout into two glasses—a small one for Mary, and the larger one for herself. Well, Mary never fancied anything you gave her, and it was a pity to waste good stout. 'There you are, me bairn,' said Bella, and handed her the glass. Mary took it in both hands.

'Thanks, mam,' she said, lifted it to her lips, sipped and shuddered.

'It'll do you good,' said Bella. 'It's medicine.'

'That's what it tastes like,' said Mary.

Bella's face took on a proselytising look; she spoke with an almost missionary fervour. 'A food—that's what stout is,' she said. 'Real nourishing food.'

'Our family's always been T.T.,' Mary said.

'I haven't,' said Bella, 'and never a day's illness in my life. Drink it up. It's good for what ails you.'

Dutifully Mary sipped again and asked, 'You think so?'

'I know so,' said Bella.

'You think it'll make me better?'

'Course it will,' said Bella. 'It takes time that's all.'

Mary sipped again, then struggled up in the bed to put down her glass. It was like she was lifting a hundredweight of coal, thought Bella.

'I don't think I've got that much time left,' Mary said.

'Don't talk so daft,' said Bella. 'Of course you—'

But Mary had time now only for reality. 'How's the bairn?' she asked.

'Asleep,' said Bella.

Mary said, 'He's a good bairn.'

There was bitterness in her voice, but Bella knew why. It was Mary's right to croon the baby to sleep: a right she could not exercise.

'He is that,' said Bella.

'I'd have liked more,' Mary said.

'You'll get them.'

'No, mam,' said Mary, and it was the utter certainty in her voice that hurt most ... 'Look at me. I couldn't let Tom come near me—even if he wanted to.'

Bella said severely, 'Now you listen to me, Mary Seaton. Tom loves you—'

Mary looked away. 'He's very kind,' she said.

'No, he's not,' said Bella. 'Not to everybody. I'm his mother and I should know. Now you look at me when I'm talking to you. Tom loves you, Mary. And the bairn. He'd do anything for you.' Her words had struck home: Mary began to look a little more relaxed. 'He's gone for a job,' she said.

'Yes,' said Bella, 'he told me.'

'But the strike's still on,' said Mary. 'How could he get a job round here?'

The question was a simple one. There was no reason why she should feel concern, and yet Bella felt the first faint stirrings of fear.

'That's what Jessie said,' said Bella, and Mary persisted.

'How could he, mam?' she asked.

Bella sipped at her stout, sought for comfort and found it at last.

'There's more jobs than the pits,' she said. 'Maybe he's got the chance of a bit of labouring.'

'But he's a skilled man,' said Mary. 'He shouldn't have to go labouring.'

'Shouldn't?' said Bella. 'He needs the money, Mary.'

'For me,' said Mary and looked away once more.

'Aye,' said Bella. 'For you—and the bairn. And mebbe's a bit left over to put in his pocket for when he fancies a drink God knows it's not much to ask.'

Mary turned in the bed once more and looked at her mother-in-law, her eyes huge in the wasted face.

'No,' she said. 'It's not. But it's more than you get in Gallowshield.'

*

When Jessie got home for the day her mother was still with Mary, and her father had to be fed. She looked in the larder—at least, thanks to her wage, there was still enough to eat. Black pudding, her father always fancied black pudding. She sliced it, put lard in the frying pan and set it on the fire as Bill came in from the back yard carrying a bucket of coal. 'Go easy with that,' he said. 'There's not much left.' He looked about him and Jessie knew what the next question would be. Her father couldn't stand it when her mother was out of the house.

'Where's your mother?' he asked.

'Gone to our Tom's,' she said.

'Mary bad?'

'Just the same, she says.'

She moved the frying pan and Bill hurled the contents of the bucket on to the back of the fire. Then she resumed her frying, turning each slice over carefully. Her dad was fussy about his black pudding. Bill stood beside her, hesitant, shifting his weight from foot to foot. It was not like him to have difficulty in saying what he wanted to say. At last, out it came.

'Do you think she's dying?' he asked.

Mary was very dear to her father: perhaps as dear as she was herself. Her father had always been ambitious for his children: seeing her through college, seeing Billy through medical school had represented a sacrifice on his behalf so magnanimous that she loved him for it even more than, as a

child, she had loved this upright, patient man for his gentleness and kindness with her. But even so, in Billy and herself he had sired a couple of oddities, she thought. A pair of thinkers, who thought, even in situations where all the generation around her fell back on emotion. Mary was different. Mary was the same kind of simple, uncomplicated woman that he had married; the kind whose knowledge of the world comes from looking after a man and his children. Mary had come to him without parents; now he considered himself to be her father, as he was Billy's father, and Tom's and hers. And now he had to force himself to ask this question.

'No,' said Jessie. 'Mary's not dying. She's being murdered by the bosses.'

Bill struggled to come to grips with his daughter's intransigence 'She's got T.B., Jessie,' he said. 'Even work won't cure that.'

'A decent wage would,' said Jessie. 'Proper care, proper food.' She took the frying pan from the fire, put the black pudding on a plate and set it down in front of her father, fetched knife, fork, bread and margarine, then swung the kettle on its hob to make tea. Free woman or not, Jessie would never have dreamed of sitting down to eat before her father had been served. At last she said, 'How long's the strike been on now, dad?'

'Seven weeks,' said Bill.

'Seven weeks,' said Jessie. 'Before it started she was as healthy as I am. Any sign of a settlement?'

'No,' said Bill. 'We've asked to meet the bosses. They won't look at us.'

'So there's no jobs?' said Jessie.

Bill turned and looked at her, bewildered.

'The pits is closed,' he said, 'you know that.'

'And the strike's still hundred per cent?' she asked.

Bill said savagely, 'By God, it better be.'

The kettle began to boil and she began making the tea, observing the ritual her mother had first taught her when she

was eleven years old. Warm the pot with boiling water, tip it out, a spoonful of tea per person and one for the pot, and make sure the kettle's boiling again before you pour it on the tea, then leave it to brew.

Bill Seaton said, 'What are you asking all these questions for?'

'Something mam told me,' said Jessie. Bill Seaton chuckled.

'Don't tell me she's found a job,' he said.

'No,' said Jessie, 'Tom has.'

At once the smile left his face. 'Don't talk daft,' he said.

'I tell you he has,' said Jessie.

'Then God help him,' said Bill, and pushed his empty plate away.

Jessie poured out his tea.

'You mean you won't?' she said.

'I will if I can,' Bill Seaton said, 'but likely it won't be up to me.'

13

It was nice to take a day out in the country, to get away from the regiment of pallid faces, serge suits, white mufflers, cloth caps. It was like an army of ghosts in Gallowshield, an army of the dead who had once worked, and died because they lost their reasons for existence. But out in the country it was different. Red faces, brown faces, well-fed faces. And he could mix with them because the country had supplied him with the money to go. Stealing sheep had been good while it lasted, and there was still a bit of money left. He began to think of escape. With the money he'd got he couldn't go far, but there were always means of getting money, of getting out. But to call it getting out was cheating. The first word had been the right one—escape. And it was prisoners who escaped. Well, maybe they were all prisoners, back there in Gallowshield. The system enclosing them like iron bars. But he, Ford, was no man's prisoner. He came and went as he pleased; when he did go it would be on his own terms. He went into the bank, then found a pub that could do him a decent pint and some bread and cheese. And as he ate and drank he began to think what he was doing in Corbridge.

But that was nonsense: he knew damn well what he was doing in Corbridge. Corbridge was where Dolly worked, and like a bloody fool he couldn't keep away. The whole thing was barmy: she'd be at work: not even a chance to go to bed with her, and yet, he had to be with her, to remember with her the sensuality shared, to find out when it would be possible to sleep with her again. He took a walk through the whole town; she had described where she worked often enough; it

wasn't difficult to find ... by the standards of the rich he supposed it wasn't much. It stood on the outskirts of the town, not a mansion, not even a manor house, just a biggish, stone-built building of neat proportions in a couple of acres of garden, and yet it was as removed from his grasp as the moon. He settled down to watch the house. Sentry guard, he thought to himself. Bloody cupid on sentry guard, and at last he saw her through the window of what must be the dining room, polishing silver. Slowly he walked past the house whistling, 'There's a long trail awinding'. So far as he could see, she didn't look up, but he had no doubt that she had seen him. He strolled on, ceasing to whistle, once he had passed the house, and turned off the road on to the kind of country path that he saw usually only on birthday cards. It was a sunken path between banks of earth, grass covered, where wild flowers grew. On top of the banks there were drystone walls, and beyond them meadowland. On the side where he walked a mare grazed with her foals, across the road cows stood languidly in the sunlight, chewing the cud. Peace and prosperity, just like the politicians had said, but he still hadn't got his share. Suddenly above him a lark burst into song and it was the perfect metaphor because at that moment he could hear too the sound of hurrying footsteps. He moved into a hollow in the bank, and watched. Sure enough it was Dolly, her coat over her uniform. He watched until she was alongside him, then left his cover, grabbed her and swung her off her feet.

'Gotcher!' he said.

Dolly squealed her alarm as he swung her round, but she saw that it was him.

Indignantly, she said, 'Jack Ford. You –' then aimed a blow at him. It it had connected he would have felt it all right for Dolly was by no means a weakling, but he dodged her and grabbed her and kissed her. At once she responded, then in no time began to struggle free.

'What on earth are you doing here?' she asked.

'Breath of fresh air,' said Ford.

'We can't meet here,' Jack,' she said. 'We can't.'

'Frightened somebody'll catch us?' said Ford.

'Well of course I am, you daft thing,' said Dolly. 'Cook's only just gone out for her walk.' She thought for a moment then added, 'She always takes the same walk and it's always half an hour at least. You'd better come inside.'

'What,' said Ford, '—in your boss's house?'

'They've all gone to tea at the vicarage,' she said.

Like a novel he thought. Tea at the vicarage. I wonder if they play croquet too...

'You can come back for a few minutes,' Dolly said, 'but that's all, Jack. Now I mean it.'

They walked together, arms around each other, to the end of the footpath, and who could blame her? After all, she had a job, the only job in the Headley family.

The interior of the house was impressive, of that there could be no question. He'd been in bigger ones in his time—a Russian palace, a château taken over by his regiment where he'd worked for a time as a waiter in the officers' mess, but even so this place was impressive. It reeked of money, but in a quiet unostentatious way, as if money had always been there, would always be there. The hallway, for instance, besides its polished wooden flooring and quaint leather furnishings, had a kind of litter about it of shotguns, walking sticks, salmon fishing gaffs, and the elegant furnishings themselves were shabby, worn and used. Nothing there was for display. She opened a polished mahogany door that led into the drawing room, and here too the wealth was evident. Deep chairs, deep sofas covered in flowered chintz, a walnut table banded with brass that his instincts told him was both old and valuable, huge vases filled with either potpourri or roses, and on the wall, pictures. Not the kind of reproduction you got with cigarette cards or Pears' soap wrappers, but the real thing, the expensive thing, and between two of the pictures a mirror that might possibly be worth as much as the pictures themselves. He looked at himself in the mirror, he was neat and he was clean,

but in this room he was shabby. By God, he was shabby.

Dolly had reverted to her favourite theme. 'We must be clean mad, the pair of us. If your Jessie was to find out—'

'We're mad,' said Ford. 'Specially me. I'm bloody raving.' He continued his inspection of the room and finished up at another walnut table, smaller than the first but equally elegant, equally expensive-looking, on which was an array of crystal decanters and glasses. He stooped to read the silver labels hung on delicate silver chains round the neck of each decanter, then reached for the one marked whisky and poured himself a generous glass.

'Jack! What the hell do you think you're doing?' said Dolly.

'Sure you won't join me?' said Ford.

'Yes, I am,' said Dolly. 'I'll hardly have time to wash one glass out, and if cook was to smell whisky on my breath it would mean the sack for me. Now hurry up and say what you have to say and get out.'

He could understand her fears; no doubt her parents back in Gallowshield relied heavily on what she could scrape together to send to them, but even so if cook always took half an hour for her walk there was time to say what he'd come to say; Dolly must learn to savour each moment of pleasure as it came after all they didn't come that often.

'You know what I came for,' he said, and drew her into his arms.

She said, 'Mind me cap, you great fool,' but she smiled up at him even so. 'Well?' she asked. 'What did you come here for?'

'To have a look at your young man,' said Ford.

'You never,' she said.

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I did.'

She seemed to find this so incredible that for the moment at least she forgot her fears.

'You went into the bank?' she said

'That's right.'

'But you haven't got a bank account,' she said and then doubtfully, 'Have you?'

Ford laughed. 'For depositing me strike pay? No. I just went in and asked them to change me a quid.'

'But what did he say?' said Dolly.

He said, 'How would you like it? Half crowns or florins? I wouldn't call him much of a talker, Dolly,' said Ford. 'In fact I wouldn't call him much of anything.'

She stayed inside his arms but he could feel her body tense. 'I would, Jack,' she said. 'I'd call him a feller in work. Good pay -prospects. Chance to buy his own house ... one day he could be a bank manager. And if he was—'

She hesitated.

'Well?' said Ford.

'I'd call him me husband,' she said, 'and you'd call him "Sir".'

'Has he proposed yet?' Ford asked.

'No,' she said, 'not yet. But he will. And when he does—you and me's finished. Now mind I mean it.'

'All right,' said Ford. 'You mean it.' He moved away and took another drink of whisky; single malt and twelve years old at least. Only the best was good enough for the rich.

'Be sensible, Jack,' said Dolly. 'What else can I say.'

He turned to face her, a pretty, yielding redhead for whom he now, even at this moment, felt such a demanding need. He'd been a fool to come here, but then he'd been a fool to start the whole thing. But he had started and he knew damn well that he was going to go on.

'Nowt,' he said. 'You can't say a damn thing.'

'Oh hell,' she said. 'If only you had a job.'

'And no Jessie,' said Ford, but he didn't mean it the way it sounded. What he meant was that if he'd never met Jessie Dolly would have been so easy to take, but he had met Jessie...

'If you hadn't met that Jessie of yours,' said Dolly, 'then maybe you wouldn't want me either.'

It was remarkable, it was really amazing, the insight of which a woman was capable. She was pretty, perhaps if dressed right and with the right hairdo she might even be beautiful, and to sleep with she was a revelation, but he'd never have called her clever; yet here she was giving voice to thoughts that he'd hidden even from himself ... he kissed her again and once again she responded briefly, then broke free.

'That'll have to wait, Jack,' she said, with the sad patience of the poor. 'I've got work to do.' He continued to hold her and she struggled to get free. 'Jack, they've got company staying.'

Ford relented, let her go and finished his drink. 'Who this time?' he asked.

'Chap come up for a board meeting or something,' said Dolly. 'I've got all the swords to polish.'

'Swords?' said Ford. 'What does he do, swallow them?'

'He collects them,' she said.

'Your gaffer trying to sell him some?' Ford asked.

'No,' said Dolly. 'Sucking up to him more likely. That Manners has pots of money.'

Very carefully Ford put down his now empty glass and turned to face her.

'Manners?' he said. 'What's his first name?'

Dolly giggled. 'Oh Jack,' she said, 'you'd never believe it. It's Horatio.'

'Sir Horatio?' asked Ford.

She looked astonished. 'How on earth did you know?' she asked. 'You've never met him?'

Ford said in his best imitation of a company commander's voice, 'Actually, no—but I once knew his son rather well.' He poured himself another drink almost absent-mindedly, his brain racing. Dolly looked at him, her face a ludicrous blend of delight and dismay.

'You never stop kidding, do you?' she said. 'But I must get back. Finish your drink and go.'

'All right,' said Ford, and knocked back his whisky. It was a

crime to treat good stuff like that. He went to the mirror, put his cap back on and turned once more to the gleaming, satin-smooth mahogany door. How many generations of Dollies must it have taken to polish that?

Apprehensively Dolly said, 'Where are you off to now? Back to her?'

Still in his company commander's voice Ford said, 'As a matter of fact, no. I'm going to give a poor old chap a few of your young man's half crowns.'

■

It was quiet in the Seaton kitchen; Jessie sat marking books while her father read the paper The silence was companionable, broken only by the soft popping sound of the gaslight, the crackle of the fire. If Billy had been home, Jessie thought, her father would have been utterly content. It had been one of the abiding joys of his life to see his two clever children seated one at each end of the kitchen table doing their homework. Her father had a respect for knowledge because he too could have been a knowledgeable man if only he'd had a chance. Not like mam. Mam could never have been anything but what she was, feckless, fond of one drop too many, but warm and loving. Dad was for homework, but when you fell down and cut your knee, it was mam you ran to. She shook her head and went back to vulgar fractions, as Bill turned the pages of his paper, reading slowly, thoroughly, as if in the belief that if he absorbed enough, somewhere somebody would explain to him why he was out of work when there were thousands upon thousands of tons of coal beneath the place where he sat. Suddenly there were footsteps in the back yard and Bella bustled in.

Bill put down his paper and glowered. 'And where have you been?' he asked.

'Over to our Tom's,' said Bella. 'I told you.'

'Call in the pub on the way back?' said Bill.

Bella thought, there's something up. There must be some-

thing up. He never grudges me a drop, not when we can afford it. Comes out with me as often as not. A man needs a drop now and again; so does a woman like me. It can't be the beer.

'I only had the one,' she said.

'Serve it in buckets now, do they?' said Bill.

It couldn't be the beer.

'A gill,' said Bella. 'That's all I had. One gill. I don't see what call you've got to be criticising. You'd be out yourself if our Jessie hadn't brought the paper in.'

'Where's Tom?' said Bill.

Again she felt the onset of fear. Something was up all right and it involved her Tom.

'Tom's with Mary,' said Bella. 'Where else would he be?'

'And what's all this about a job?' said Bill.

For a moment she didn't understand. 'Job?' she said.

Jessie slammed down an exercise book. 'Mam,' she said, 'for heaven's sake sit down and concentrate. Didn't Tom tell you he'd got a job?'

'That's right,' said Bella. 'He did.'

Her husband asked at once. 'What kind of a job?'

'He didn't say,' said Bella.

Angrily Jessie opened another exercise book, then glared at her mother before she checked the answers.

'And it didn't occur to you to ask him?' she said.

Bella Seaton said, 'I was with the bairn, and Mary. That's women's business, Jessie. Most of us leave the jobs to the men —when they can get them.'

Jessie said, 'I'm sorry, mam. I didn't mean to be rude.'

And that's just your trouble, me bairn, thought Bella. You never do mean to be rude—but you always are.

'That's all right, hinnie,' she said. 'It's just—I don't know what all the commotion's about. I thought you'd be pleased our Tom's in work—even if it is only labouring.'

Bill Seaton let out his breath in a long sigh of relief. 'Oh,' he said, 'if that's all it is—' But his daughter interrupted him.

'Just a minute, dad,' she said, and then to her mother: 'Did Tom say it was labouring?'

'Well no,' said Bella, 'but—'

Jessie said, 'Did Mary?'

'Mary didn't know,' said Bella, 'but what else could it be, pet? The pits are all closed.'

'And they'll stay closed,' Bill Seaton said, and again Bella Seaton felt fear for her son.

'Wait, dad,' said Jessie, and turned once more to her mother. 'Mam,' she said patiently, 'how could he get a labouring job? The pits are closed, the yards are closed and there hasn't been any new building here in months.'

Bella, despite her fears, began to react against this cross-examination.

'Well, I don't know,' she said 'And what are you picking on me for anyway? He might have got a job with the council—'

'Fat chance,' Bill Seaton said. 'There's queues miles long for council jobs.'

Bella said apprehensively, 'You don't think he's going away, do you? Like emigrating or something?'

Gently, her daughter said, 'No, mam. I don't.'

'Well then?' said Bella. 'What's all the fuss about?'

Bill Seaton said explosively, 'I think he's scabbing. That's what I think.'

Like all her kind, Bella Seaton had a horror of scabs. To blackleg was infinitely worse than to go to prison.

'But he can't,' she said.

'Why can't he?' said Bill.

'Because it's not right,' said Bella. 'We've both of us taught him it's not right. He wouldn't.'

'By God, he'd better not,' thought Bill.

'If only I'd thought to ask him,' said Bella. 'But I'm sure you're wrong, da. You must be.'

Bill Seaton said grimly, 'Don't worry. I'll ask him meself.'

'You're going over there?' Bella asked, and thought at once of Mary. Poor Mary. She'd never be able to stand the kind of

row there would be if what Bill suspected was true.

'Go there?' said Bill. 'No fear. This is one time he comes to me.'

'But who'll look after Mary?' said Bella.

'He'll find somebody,' Bill said. 'What I've got to say won't take long.'

14

Tom was fussing too much and he knew it but even so he couldn't help it. He hoped and prayed that Mary wouldn't notice the anxiety he could feel in himself exuding like sweat. Da had sent for him and that could only mean trouble the way things were. But this wasn't da's fight, not this time. This time the struggle was between his own conscience and Mary's needs.

'Now you'll be all right,' he said. 'Mrs. Laidlaw's downstairs with the bairn. If you need anything just knock on the floor and she'll be straight up.'

Mary's face had the look of resigned helplessness it had so often these days. She knew herself to be incapable; knew herself to be at the mercy of her mother-in-law, or Jessie or Mrs. Laidlaw. Not that they weren't kind; they were all kind. It was just that she wanted to be well and free of their kindness.

'But what do you want to go out for?' she asked.

'Da wants me,' said Tom.

'But what *for*?' she said again.

'God knows,' said Tom and warned himself to be careful. Trying to make his voice sound bored he went on, 'Lodge meeting likely. He's daft on the union.'

She put her hand over his. Her hand was hot, dry, clawlike. 'You won't be long, will you?' she said. Tom stood over the bed and kissed her on the forehead.

'No, pet,' he said. 'I'll be as quick as I can.' But still the clawlike hand held on to his.

'Tom,' she said, 'it wouldn't be about your job, would it?'

'My job's my business,' said Tom, 'and yours and the bairn's. It's got nowt to do with me dad.'

He went out then, not hurrying: there was nothing but trouble waiting for him at the end of his walk. Well then, let it wait.

▪

In the Seaton kitchen they stood waiting Tom's arrival, Jessie still marking books, Bill still searching in the newspaper for the answer to his problems, and Bella unravelling the wool out of an old jersey and rolling it into a ball ... Jessie had moved on now from vulgar fractions to English composition: 50 per cent for content, 25 per cent for spelling, 25 per cent for grammar, as her new headmaster had decreed. Her old headmaster had awarded nothing for content at all ... it was a struggle to keep her mind on the job she was doing, and even so the thoughts came unbidden. Bill in his Windsor-backed chair, her mother in her favourite place by the fire, herself seated at the table, we're three judges, she thought. We are about to sit in judgement on one of our own, and she looked across to her mother still busy with the ball of wool—only one of us will recommend clemency.

Her own brother, she thought. How could he do such a thing? To blackleg was to bring shame not only on himself but on the whole family. And her brother of all people, big, easy-going Tom, who went with the crowd because it was the simplest way to travel now he was running headlong into the crowd, if what they suspected was correct, and the crowd would not give way. For a sin like this the crowd would never give way. He had always done what others suggested he should do, her brother. No doubt when it came to sheep stealing Jack Ford had given him precise instructions; when he did work down the pit the overman would tell him exactly what to do Tom had never been bright, as Billy was bright, as she herself—she broke off the thought there. At any moment she would be guilty of intellectual snobbery, and that to her was an unforgivable sin. Bella spoke into the silence. 'I thought I'd make the bairn a matinee coat.'

Without looking up Bill Seaton grunted, 'Oh aye,' and her daughter dived behind the protective barrier of exercise books.

'I mean,' said Bella, 'you couldn't wear this again—not with all them holes in it.'

'Aye,' said Bill.

'I mean I don't want to get at you,' said Bella, 'but them holes is all hot ash off your pipe. If only you'd be more—'

'Bella Seaton,' said Bill.

'Aye?' said Bella.

'I'm trying to read.'

'Nobody's stopping you,' said his wife.

'If you believe that you'd believe anything,' said Bill Seaton, and his wife thought, things must be bad with our Tom. Things have to be very bad before my man starts turning sarcastic.

There was a sound of footsteps outside and all three of them tensed until a voice called out, 'Anybody in?'

Bill Seaton put down his paper. 'Aye,' he called. 'We're all here.' His face was already set in rigid lines, but it was Jack who entered. In his hand he carried a cavalry sabre of the 1870s, that badly needed polishing. Bill Seaton hardly noticed it. 'Oh it's you,' he said.

Bella Seaton jumped up. 'Jack lad,' she said, 'it's good to see you. Ee, what in the world have you got there? A fancy poker?'

Jack Ford said, 'It's a sword, Mrs. Seaton.'

'You've never gone and joined up again?' Bella asked.

'Not if they're using these things,' said Ford. 'I got it off old Sammy Foster.'

Jessie Seaton asked at once, 'What for?'

Deliberately he chose not to understand her.

'Five bob,' he said. 'He thought he'd get 7/6—but he hadn't reckoned how thirsty he was.'

'Jack,' said Jessie and her tone was suspicious, but this time it was her father who interrupted her.

'Let's have a look at it,' he said.

Ford handed it over, and Bill drew it from its scabbard.

The rust on it made it reluctant to draw free.

'I never thought old Sammy would part with that,' said Bill.

'When you're skint you'll part with anything,' said Ford.

Bill Seaton looked at him, steady-eyed.

'Don't you believe it, son,' he said.

Jessie broke in quickly, 'If he was so fond of it –why didn't he keep it clean? Give it a polish?'

Bill Seaton said, 'Because he can't. Crippled with rheumatism, old Sammy.'

Ford grinned. 'He can still lift a glass all the same,' he said. He took the sword back from Bill and looked at it. Sword and scabbard alike were a mess, rusty and black with grime.

'I wonder if I could give this a bit of a clean up, Mrs. Seaton?' he said. 'No good dirty, is it?'

'Can't you do it at your own place?' Jessie asked. 'Instead of mucking up mam's kitchen.'

Bella said reproachfully, 'Jessie!'

But Jessie looked hard at Ford. 'You're up to something,' she said.

His face took on a wounded, reproachful look. 'No, I'm not,' he said. 'It's just that my landlady wouldn't let me near her kitchen—or her Mepo.'

Bella said, 'Well, of course you can, Jack. It's only—' she looked desperately at Bill.

'Our Tom's coming over,' Bill said. 'Me and him have a bit of business to talk over.'

'Oh,' said Ford, 'I see.' He rammed the sword back into its scabbard. 'I don't want to be in the way.'

Bella Seaton said at once, 'You're never in the way here, Jack —you can use the front room.'

'I don't want to make a mess,' said Ford.

'There's plenty of newspaper,' Bella said, and Bill clutched instinctively at the one he was reading, but she rummaged under a chair cushion and produced some old papers, then crossed to the corner cupboard, brought out a wooden box with dusters and Mepo. 'Here you are,' she said.

'Thanks, Mrs. Seaton,' said Ford, and went towards the door. Before he could open it, Bill Seaton said, 'Our Jessie will give you a hand.'

'I just want a word with Tom first,' said Jessie Bill Seaton said, 'Go and help Jack.'

She stayed where she was. 'But, dad, I—'

Her father shouted angrily, 'You just do as you're told. Gerraway into that front room.'

Bella said, 'When he says jump, Jessie—you jump.'

'What's that?' said Jessie.

'Something I heard you say this morning,' said Bella. 'It seems to run in the family.'

Jack Ford and Jessie left them to it. Bella looked steadily at Bill. 'You want me out of the way an'all?' she asked.

'Aye,' said Bill. 'A few minutes anyway. Hadaway down to the Red Lion and get a jug of beer if there's any money left.'

She too made no move to go.

'You won't get angry?' said Bella.

'That's up to him,' Bill Seaton said. 'Go and get us a drink.' She picked up the jug and went out into the yard, through the back door and out into the lane on her way to the Red Lion. It would be nice, she thought to share a jug of beer together, but her husband didn't really want beer. He wanted to be rid of her and that could only mean that he was sure Tom was guilty...

In the front room, Ford arranged sheets of paper round a chair, took emery paper from his pocket and began rubbing down the sword. Decades of rust and grime would have to go before he could start polishing it. Jessie watched him in silence, but he knew that wouldn't last long, and it didn't

'Going in for fencing, are you?' she said at last.

'With this thing? More like felling trees,' said Ford.

'Starting a collection then?'

'In a way, bonny lass,' he said. 'In a way.'

She could stand it no longer; hinting had never been her way. 'Jack Ford,' she said. 'Just what are you up to?'

'Up to?' said Ford, at his most innocent. 'I happened to have

a few bob—and Sammy happened to have this sword—and I just took a fancy to it.'

'I don't believe you,' said Jessie

Equably Ford said, 'I didn't think you would.' He went on rubbing with the emery paper, a rasping sound that stood her nerves on edge. 'You're always on to me about getting on and making myself amount to something,' he said.

'I didn't mean to nag you, Jack,' she said.

'Yes you did,' said Ford. 'Thank God.' He looked up at her, and held out his hand. She took it and he took her to him. She felt very safe, very secure in the circle of his arms.

'If you didn't nag me I'd never get off me backside,' said Ford.

Before she could stop herself she said, 'There's no need for coarseness.'

'Aye,' he said. 'You're right. You never get on if you're coarse.'

'But what on earth's that got to do with buying a sword?' she asked.

'If it works,' he said, 'I'll tell you.'

'It's not -not illegal, is it?' she asked.

'No, love,' said Ford. 'Not this time. You and your Billy say I've got brains. I'm trying to use them.' He let her go and resumed work with the emery paper. 'Have you heard from Billy?'

'He's still studying,' she said.

'If I'm going to have a doctor for a brother in-law I have to make something of meself,' said Ford.

'I still don't see where that sword comes in,' she persisted.

'You never give up, do you?' he asked. 'Don't rush me, lass. It may be the sword doesn't come into it at all. It's just an idea I've got.'

From the kitchen they could hear Tom's voice raised in protest. 'Da,' it said. 'Just listen a minute.'

Then Bill's voice: 'You bloody liar.'

'Aye, aye,' said Ford. 'The business meeting's started.'

There was a crash from inside the kitchen and then Tom's voice once more: 'Da—for God's sake.'

When the next crash came Ford stood up.

Jessie said, 'He told us to stay out.'

'No, pet,' said Ford, 'he told you to stay out,' and went to the door...

He had walked all the way from his house to visit his father at his father's request, or rather command; he had left an ailing wife and young child with a neighbour and although Mrs. Laidlaw was both obliging and helpful he would far sooner have stayed with Mary himself, but his father had wanted to talk so he'd come to talk, and now here he was flat on the floor, knocked down by his father's fist. They had talked for perhaps 30 seconds, and then his father had hit him, as if he were a child again, and not a man in his prime, a man who could take his father with one hand, a man with a wife and a child. But he couldn't attack his own father; better to lie there and wait till his father got some sense.

Jack stood in the kitchen doorway looking at Tom. Sensible lad, he thought. Once you're down, stay down till your father gets more sense. He walked further into the kitchen and righted an upturned chair. Bill Seaton didn't even see him.

'Get up,' he said to his son.

'Da, will you just listen?'

'I said get up,' Bill Seaton said.

Warily Tom got to his feet, keeping his open hands firmly by his sides. Bill Seaton moved in on him again, fist up.

'You rotten—' he said and the heavy fist swung, Tom swerved to avoid it and Jack grabbed Bill from behind, holding his arms by his sides. Bill struggled, but the younger man was too strong for him. When he continued to struggle, Ford put more power into the hold he exerted on the elder man, more and more until it began to hurt, and at last Bill stayed motionless.

'Hey now,' said Ford, 'hold on a minute. Who do you think you are? Jack Johnson?'

'You let go of me,' said Bill Seaton. 'You're not in this family yet.'

He began to struggle once more, and again Ford squeezed, again the pain began until he was obliged to be still.

'Damn you, Jack,' he said. 'Let me go!'

'Let's hear what he's done first,' said Ford.

'He's a bloody scab,' Bill Seaton said, and as he spoke the fight went out of him. Ford sensed this and let him go. Suddenly Bill Seaton looked much older.

From the doorway Jessie asked, 'He's admitted it?'

'Aye,' said Bill, and sat heavily in the Windsor-backed chair

'You're a blackleg?' said Jessie.

'Not yet,' said Tom. 'But I will be on Monday.'

Ford looked at him; it didn't seem possible that Tom could be so stupid. In any industry to scab was an unforgivable crime, but for the miners it was perhaps even more than that, the deadliest of deadly sins. Time and again when they'd struck blacklegs had been brought in, and time and again they'd been driven back to work because of them, but always after each strike, there'd been revenge on the blacklegs, and their revenge was brutal and immediate. Sometimes they didn't wait for the strike to be over; they frightened the blacklegs off at once, and they weren't fussy how they did it. Fists, boots, pick-handles, it didn't matter: a scab was a scab. There was even a song about it, the song he remembered Charlie Stobbs singing in the trenches long enough ago:

> 'Divent gan near the Delaval mine
> Across the road and they've stretched a line
> To crack their neck and break the spine
> Of the dirty blackleg miner.'

And Tom was going to risk all this.

'Are you out of your bloody mind?' Ford asked.

Tom Seaton said, 'No more than anybody else round here.' He turned towards the door that led to the yard.

'Wait, man,' said Ford and strode past him, stood between him and the door. Tom braced himself: maybe he was a match for Ford and maybe he wasn't—most likely he wasn't, but this man wasn't his father and if Jack Ford started anything he would give him a few that he would remember.

'You an'all?' said Tom.

'No, Tom,' said Ford. 'Not me. Your marrers. They'll belt the living daylights out of you.' Tom grinned, but there was no humour in the grin, it was a grimace, part fear, part bravado.

'They would if they got the chance,' he said. 'But they won't. We'll have police protection.'

Bill Seaton stood up in his chair at this. 'You'd hide behind the bloody bobbies,' he asked.

'Yes,' said Tom. 'I would.'

Jessie said, 'But why, Tom?'

Tom looked at his sister. For a clever woman she could be awfully stupid sometimes.

'Because of Mary, that's why,' he said. 'She's dying and I couldn't do a thing about it. Well, now I can.'

At once Bill's attitude changed. The anger was gone, there was only pleading left.

'Not that way, Tom,' he said. 'Not by betraying the rest of us.'

Tom said, 'Show me another way. It's all very well for you—you've got her to keep you.' He nodded at Jessie.

'I help you as well, Tom,' Jessie said. 'When I can.'

'Aye,' said Tom. 'You do. And so does Jack. And I'm grateful. But gratitude doesn't pay doctor's bills. There's only money does that—and I'm going to get it. So if you're not going to belt us, Jack—I'll say goodnight.'

He moved forward and Jack Ford moved away from the door. There was a dignity about Tom that night, no doubt about it.

Bill Seaton called out, 'Tom!'

Tom turned and faced his father, but he took his time about it.

'I'm sorry I hit you,' said Bill.

Tom Seaton said, 'I'm not sorry I didn't hit you back. I could have done—if you hadn't been my father.'

This time he left: until he'd gone he'd dominated the room.

Jessie said, 'What are we going to do?'

Jack Ford straightened a clippy mat that had been rucked up by Tom's fall.

'Nowt,' he said.

She turned on him at once. 'What do you mean, nowt?'

'What I say,' said Ford. 'He's right. His wife's dying and the only way he can get money for her is to scab. So he'll have to scab.'

Bill Seaton said incredulously, 'You're defending him?'

Once you get on to a subject as charged with emotion as this one common sense goes out of the window, thought Ford.

'What do you want me to do?' he said aloud. 'Tell him to stand by his mates and let Mary die?'

'They'll kill him,' said Bill.

This was exaggeration, but Ford knew what Bill meant. Tom's one of their own, they'd be harder on him than on chaps brought in from outside. Tom was a Judas.

Jessie said, 'He's got police protection.'

'He won't always,' said Bill. 'They'll kill him.'

The yard door opened and Bella came in carrying the jug now full of beer. Carefully she carried it over to the table and looked about her.

'Didn't our Tom come then?' she asked.

*

It was another fine day when he went back to Corbridge. This time he wore his best suit and a tie that he'd picked up in Russia. A pure silk tie it was, and made in Paris. His suit was worn, he knew, but the cut was good and it was freshly pressed; his shirt and collar were spotless, his boots gleamed in the

sunlight. He carried the sword wrapped in brown paper from the station to the house that was neither mansion nor manor, but still had its own unpretentious elegance, and ran lightly up the flight of steps that led to the front door. For a moment he hesitated: this was going to be a tricky one, and he might end up being thrown out on his ear. On the other hand he'd come all this way and paid for a train fare. Might as well get on with it. He raised his hand and let the gleaming brass knocker fall. Within moments Dolly opened the door, saw who it was and gaped.

In his best company commander's voice Ford said, 'Sir Horatio Manners, please. My name is Ford.'

In an urgent whisper Dolly said, 'Jack, for heaven's sake—'

'I think you'll find he's expecting me,' said Ford and moved forward into the hall.

'Honest?' she whispered.

'Honest.'

She left him then and went into the drawing room. Sir Horatio Manners was reading a newspaper. He was a neat, greying man of 55 or so, with dark eyes that glittered with intelligence. Dolly was afraid of him; his containment suggested untapped sources of hidden power; his rages, she guessed, would be frightening. He tipped well, but even so she feared him. He looked at her over the top of his *Times*, and she took a deep breath, delivered her message, and hoped to God Jack wasn't kidding again.

'Beg pardon, sir,' she said. 'There's a—a Mr. Ford to see you.' Manners folded up his *Times*.

'Very well,' he said, 'show him in.'

His voice was hard and classless, not the upper-middle class drawl she was used to in her employers, but she had no time to think about his voice: she was too busy sighing her relief.

Manners glowered at her. 'Well, girl?'

'Yes, sir,' she said. 'Right away, sir,' curtsied and went out.

Manners stood up and looked about the room. Sunlight blazed through the window. Carefully he moved a chair so

that it faced the window, then drew the curtains so that the sunlight was shining directly on the face of whoever sat in it. After that he moved his own chair into shadow.

In the hall Ford was stripping away the brown paper in which he had wrapped the sword, and when it came free it was clean and glittering. Dolly came up to him and said in a whisper, 'He says he'll see you.'

Ford said, 'Well, of course, he will,' and dropped the brown paper into an empty plant pot. 'You'd better get rid of that, after you've shown me in,' then followed her to the drawing-room door, and waited until she had knocked and entered.

'Mr. Ford, sir,' said Dolly and Ford moved past her.

'Come in, Ford. Come in,' said Manners. 'Sit down, won't you?' He indicated the chair bathed in sunlight, then himself retired into shadow.

So it's going to be like that, is it? Ford thought. Aloud he said, 'Thanks very much,' and sat.

'Care for a cigarette?' said Manners, and a hand appeared from the shadows holding a long gold case.

Ford took a cigarette and said, 'Thank you.' As he reached for his matches, Dolly left the room, round-eyed.

Manners looked at the sabre by Ford's feet.

'I see you've brought it with you,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' said Ford; the sun in his eyes was blinding. 'I said I would when I wrote to you.'

He picked up the sword, rose to his feet and gave it to Manners, then retired to another chair, one with a convenient ashtray nearby, and flicked ash into the ashtray. He made the movement look quite fortuitous, but now he no longer had the sun in his eyes. 15-love, thought Manners, and examined the sabre, first hilt and scabbard, then pulling it free to look at the blade.

Still examining it, he said, 'You also said you knew my son.'

'I was his sergeant, sir,' said Ford.

'Yes,' said Manners. 'He wrote to me about you once or twice.'

Ford leaned forward, politely interested, no more. 'Yes, sir?'

'You—impressed him,' said Manners. 'And you puzzled him too.'

'Puzzled him, sir?'

'You were his equal in strength and courage,' Manners began.

But Ford interrupted: 'I doubt that, sir.'

'He didn't,' said Manners. 'And you had twice as many brains. You used them too. What puzzled him was that he knew that you would survive the war—and he wouldn't. And he was right. Did you see him die?'

'Yes, sir,' said Ford. 'I was—holding him.'

'Did he say anything?' Manners asked.

'Yes, sir,' said Ford. 'He said, "What the hell am I doing here, sergeant? I said I'd be at the Savile"—and very soon after that he died.'

'Was there much pain?' Manners asked. 'No ... that's a damn fool question. You'd lie, anyway.'

'I would, sir,' said Ford, 'but I don't have to. He went—very quick, sir.'

Manners said, 'You've a kind heart as well as a good brain. Thank you.'

Ford sat still, saying nothing. From his demeanour he might be paying a social call, no more. We can't have this, thought Manners. This youngster's beginning to make all the running.

'Did you like the army?' he asked aloud.

'No, sir,' said Ford.

'Why not?' said Manners.

'People kept trying to kill me,' said Ford.

Manners laughed aloud. 'I forgot,' he said. 'You never knew it in peacetime, did you? That's all I did know.' He waited a moment, but Ford was still silent. 'Didn't my son tell you?'

'We didn't have all that much time to chat,' said Ford.

'Twelve years,' said Manners, 'then I took my discharge.

My brother sergeants thought I was mad. I didn't. I went into business. Used my savings and my wits. I'm a rich man, Ford. I suppose you know that.'

'I thought it was likely, sir,' said Ford. 'You've got a title—and your son was always flush. I mean he always had money, sir. A lot more than his pay.'

'And you didn't,' said Manners.

Jack Ford grinned. 'I still don't,' he said.

'Like a glass of sherry?' Manners asked.

'No thank you, sir,' said Ford.

'Anything else?'

Ford said, 'If there's any whisky, sir—'

'There is indeed,' said Manners and went to the drinks table, poured out whisky and sherry. Really this young man was scoring point after point: he even had the sense to turn down the drink he didn't want instead of trying to be polite about it, with the result that he got the drink he did want. He carried the whisky over to Ford, who thanked him for it.

'Took your time contacting me, didn't you?' Manners said. 'It's four years since my son died.'

Ford raised his glass, said, 'Your health, sir,' and sipped at his whisky, then, 'Didn't know where you were, sir.'

Manners said, 'A man with your brains could find out, surely?'

'Wasn't sure you'd want to see me just after your son was killed, sir,' said Ford.

Manners said dryly, 'That's much better.'

Ford thought to himself, he's on to you. He's clever. All the same the best thing you can do is keep talking.

'Then I read in the paper you were staying up here, sir,' he said.

'Did you also read that I was considering opening a factory here?' asked Manners.

'No, sir.'

Manners looked at him in astonishment.

'Do you know,' he said at last, 'I think I believe you.' He

picked up the sword once more and examined its gleaming blade.

'A good one,' he said; 'good condition too. It must be 50 years old.'

'All of that, sir,' said Ford.

'And bright as new,' said Manners. 'Somebody went to a lot of trouble over this.'

Ford said, 'My uncle, sir.'

'Uncle eh?' said Manners. 'What was his name?'

'Ford, sir.'

'I don't remember any Fords,' said Manners.

'He'd be a good 20 years older than you, sir,' said Ford.

Manners chuckled.

'If he'd lived,' said Ford.

'But he was in my regiment?' Manners asked.

'So he always said, sir,' said Ford.

Manners chuckled again, sipped at his sherry, then said, 'You know, my son was right. You have got brains. You've only got your dead uncle's word for it that he was in my regiment, but why say he was if he wasn't?'

'That's what I think, sir,' said Ford.

'And why should I bother to look him up?' said Manners.

'And he did have the sword, sir,' said Ford.

Manners said blandly, 'So he did. I wonder how. He wasn't supposed to, you know.'

'Probably forgot to hand it in, sir,' said Ford and Manners chuckled again.

'How much do you want for it?' he asked.

'Nothing, sir,' said Ford. 'It's a gift.'

Manners pretended surprise. 'You're very generous,' he said.

'I don't think so, sir,' said Ford.

'Don't you?'

'No, sir,' said Ford, 'but I was with your son when he died.'

'You've a civil tongue all right—but you're still telling me I owe you a debt . . . help yourself to more whisky.'

'Thank you very much,' said Ford and went over to the

drinks cabinet, where whisky was still single malt and still 12 years old.

'Thank my host,' said Manners. 'I didn't pay for it, he did.' He sipped again at his sherry, then added, 'I think I'm going to offer you a job.'

Ford turned from the drinks table at that, willing the hand that held the glass to stay steady.

'A job, sir?' he asked.

Manners said, 'No need to sound so surprised. It's what you came here for, isn't it?'

15

The bus clattered up to the colliery gates, but the picket line was strung out in front of the gates and all the way across them. The picket made no attempt to move. One by one Tom and the other blacklegs got out of the bus, and Tom instinctively pulled up his coat collar, pulled down his cap to avoid recognition. It was all very well for the Welshmen and the Scots, but he could be recognised, he could be known, pointed out, marked. As the scabs formed up in an unwieldy bunch there came a menacing growl from the picket and at once the police surrounded the blacklegs. They were formidable men, these policemen, bigger and stronger by far than those that they had been sent to protect. There was comfort in their presence, but there was shame too. In charge of the police was a tall, rawboned inspector. Unaccompanied, he marched up to the picket line.

'Stand clear of those gates,' he said.

The picket leader came forward. He too was tall. He too seemed accustomed to command. They could have been brother talking to brother.

'We're picketing, inspector,' the picket leader said. 'We're not breaking any laws.'

'You're creating an obstruction,' said the inspector. 'Stand clear.' The picket didn't move. The inspector drew his baton and looked back at his men, nodded his head once. Immediately batons appeared in their hands too. The inspector motioned with his baton and the front rank of policemen moved forward, formed up behind him.

'If I have to move you,' the inspector said, 'I will.'

The picket leader looked at the massive policemen ranged in front of him, then thought of his own forces, their wills sapped by idleness, their bodies weakened by hunger. That the inspector would order his men to use their batons he had no doubt, and there could be only one end to such a contest.

'All right, lads,' he said. 'Let them in.'

Reluctantly the picket yielded and the colliery gates swung open. Flanked by policemen the blacklegs marched into the colliery yard, Tom burrowing deep into the centre of them, head down. As they marched the picket started up a rhythmic chant, one word repeated over and over: 'Scab scab scab scab scab.'

■

They walked along the promenade because the promenade was free. By now, thought Ford, they should have known every stone of it. Today no band played in the bandstand, and that, he thought, was a pity. After his interview with Sir Horatio he thought he was entitled to at least one chorus of 'See the Conquering Hero Comes'. But the promenade was almost deserted. The sky was cloudy and there was a blustering wind, that promised rain; the sea was grey and flecked with angry white caps blown up by the wind. Not the ideal day for courting but where else could they go? He walked along beside Jessie, carrying a little pile of exercise books which meant that sooner or later she would tell him she would have to go home; there could be no more time together ... the children needed her.

She said, 'I'm cold,' and as she spoke there came the first spattering of rain. He took her hand, and together they ran down the deserted promenade to a rickety shelter with a seat inside. The bench they sat on was hard and the wind whistled through gaps in the sides of the shelter, but at least it was dry. Ford leaned back on the bench, relaxed, put his arm round Jessie and looked out at the grey and angry sea 'That's better,' he said.

Jessie leaned against him, but there were still questions to be answered.

'I'm surprised you didn't bring your sword with you,' she said. But he was going into that in his own time and in his own way.

'Need a bodyguard now, do you?' he asked, and squeezed her waist. She smiled at that, then the smile faded.

'No,' she said, 'it's our Tom who needs the bodyguard.'

Ford said, 'I heard he'd got one.'

'He has,' said Jessie. 'The bobbies.'

'Just as well,' said Ford.

She looked at him: there was love in her eyes, but there was despair too.

'You just don't care, do you?' she said.

'Care?' he said. 'What about?'

The trouble was, she thought, that he really doesn't understand. He just doesn't know what I'm talking about.

'About what Tom's doing,' she said 'You don't care a scrap.'

'He's doing the best he can, Jessie,' said Ford. 'I'm blowed if I know what I can do about it.'

She stared steadily ahead, withdrawn from him, her waist no longer supple to his arm. Ford reached out and took her chin between his fingers, turned her face so that her eyes looked into his. And still there was love in her eyes, love and despair. How could she love a man she despaired of?

'Look,' he said. 'As I see it, what you want me to do is to stop Tom from blacklegging and at the same time make sure that Mary doesn't die of T.B. Is that it?'

'You're always so logical,' she said.

'And you're always so emotional,' said Ford.

'There's nothing wrong with emotion,' she said.

'In its place, it's fine,' said Ford.

'And just what is its place?' Jessie asked.

'With us, bonny lass. With you and me,' he said. 'Together.'

Jessie said, 'And that's the only love you know.'

'It's the one I want,' he said. 'The only one.'

She reached up and grabbed his shoulders as if she was going to shake him.

'Jack,' she said. 'Listen. Nothing can save Tom now.'

'Not even the bobbies?' said Ford.

'Not even them,' she said. 'Sooner or later one of the pickets will recognise him –and when they do—they'll get him. You know that.'

There was no point in reassuring lies; she knew the town and its people as well as he did.

'Aye,' he said, 'I do.'

'And Mary will die,' said Jessie.

No point in false comfort on that subject either.

'It's likely,' he said.

'And we can't do a thing about it,' she said.

He knew her far too well to assume that she was beginning to see sense at last.

'Not a thing,' he said.

'But they're not the only ones. There's hundreds of thousands of Marys and Toms all over the country,' said Jessie. 'They're the ones we should be thinking about.'

'Are they?' he asked. 'Think about everybody except us, is that it? They're trapped, love,' he said. 'Just like Tom is.'

'Trapped by the system,' said Jessie.

'So we're going to change the system?'

'That's right,' Jessie said.

He looked down at the earnest, intent face and he just couldn't help it. He laughed.

'I'm serious, Jack,' she said.

'I wouldn't doubt you,' said Jack. 'Oh Jessie, not again. Go to the union meetings, is that it? Knock on doors, make speeches?'

'Yes,' said Jessie. 'That's exactly it.'

'And change the world?'

'It's time it was changed,' she said. 'And anyway, the Russians changed theirs. You were there, you saw it.'

'Aye,' he said. 'I did.'

There were so many things he could have said, horrifying things, terrible things, things that could have reduced her to tears, but he kept them to himself. Murmansk was something he would always keep to himself: it was too appalling to share with another human being.

'If the Russians did it,' said Jessie, 'we can do it too. We can change our whole way of life.'

'So it's "we" now, is it?' said Ford. 'I thought you had your eye on me for the job.'

'We're all going to have to do something,' she said, 'but most of us need leading—'

'And I'm the leader?' he asked.

Still holding his shoulders, still looking into his eyes, she said, 'Yes, Jack. Whether you like it or not—you are.'

'You're wrong,' he said.

'No I'm not,' said Jessie. 'Just listen, just for a minute—' He took her hands in his, drew them from his shoulders and held them.

'No, bonny lass,' he said. 'You've had your say. Now *you* just listen and I'll tell you why you're wrong. I'm not changing the system because I don't want to. The system suits me fine.' As he spoke an old woman came into the shelter. She wore a heavy woollen shawl spattered with rain, and a man's cap with a hat pin through it, a cap that could have done with a clean even when a man had last worn it. She wheezed, and even though she stood as far away from them as it was possible to get, they were in no doubt that she smelled; they'd no doubt either that she was determined to listen to their conversation. They began to talk in lowered voices as Jessie withdrew her hands from his. Was it shyness, he wondered, or anger at what he had just said?

'Don't mind me, me bairn,' the old woman said. 'You're only young once. Go ahead and enjoy yourselves.'

She settled down in her seat as one who'd settled into a seat in the theatre.

'The system suits you fine?' said Jessie. 'How can you sit there and say that?'

'Because it's true,' said Ford. 'This system's only bad for the ones who don't have money.'

'Well then,' said Jessie. 'Doesn't it prove—'

He interrupted her. 'I'm going to get money,' he said. 'Lots of money.' The old woman edged nearer to them along the bench on which they sat.

'Oh this is hopeless,' Jessie whispered. 'Can't we go out?'

'It's still raining,' he said. 'A few weeks from now that wouldn't matter. We'd just have to make a dash for the car.'

'Oh would we?' she said. 'And how would you get a car? Rob a bank?'

'Nothing so strenuous,' said Ford. 'I've got a job.'

His voice, though low-pitched, was a carrying one. There seemed nothing wrong with the old woman's hearing.

'A job?' she said. 'By, aren't you the lucky one? There's not many around here can say they're in work.'

'Thanks, missus,' said Ford, and at the same time Jessie said, 'Just take no notice.' She turned back to him.

He had expected almost any kind of reaction to the news he'd brought from incredulity to thanksgiving, but not the one he'd got.

Jessie was horrified. 'You've got a job?' she whispered.

'Start next month,' said Ford.

'But how can you? The strike?' she said. 'You wouldn't blackleg?'

Ford said softly, 'Bosses don't blackleg, Jessie.'

'Bosses?' she repeated.

'You can't tell me anything about bosses,' the old woman said. 'I was in service for nigh on forty years and I know. Robbers the lot of them. Take all and give nowt. You wouldn't have a cigarette on you, would you, son?'

'No he hasn't,' said Jessie as Ford dipped into his pocket, produced a packet of Woodbines and gave her one, then struck a match for her.

'By,' the old woman said, 'you're a real canny lad.' She looked up into his face and cackled. 'A bonny lad an'all. If I was fifty years younger—'

As she said this, Jessie got up and walked out of the shelter.

'Ee lad,' the old woman said, 'I hope I'm not making trouble for you.'

'That's all right,' said Ford.

'Girls is getting that stuck up these days. Now in my time,' the old woman said, 'any lass who had got her hands on a feller like you—' she shook her head in bewilderment. 'You'd better get after her, son. I'm only an old woman and I've talked too bloody much.'

'Ta-ra, then,' said Ford. 'See you again.'

'If you're here, you will,' the old woman said. 'I'm always here. Come and have a good crack,' she said wistfully as Ford left.

The rain had reduced to the kind of fretting drizzle that soaked into cloth and stayed there. He peered through it to where Jessie strode quickly along the promenade in the direction of the tram stop. She wasn't waiting for him and he knew it; he had to run to catch up. 'What did I do now?' he asked as he strode beside her.

'Pandering to that old wretch,' said Jessie, 'when we were talking about something important.'

'Aren't we going to change her world?' said Ford.

She took it like a blow, and at last she said, 'I don't mind the fact that you always have an answer, but why must it always be the right answer?' Then she slipped her hand under his arm.

'Let's go home,' she said. 'At least we can talk there in peace.'

*

He had hung his jacket in front of the kitchen fire where it steamed away as it dried, then been ushered with proper ceremony into the front room while Jessie went upstairs to

change her wet dress. When she came down again, she had changed into something looser, simpler, a plain muslin that made her look younger: she had her hair down too, and that gave her a softer, more feminine look that he responded to at once.

'Come here,' he said, and when she did so, he put his arms about her. The embrace was a solid and reassuring one, she thought; when Jack embraced her like that she felt secure from anything the world outside could do.

'It's time I told you about Sammy Foster's sword,' he said.

'Sword?' she said softly. 'I thought we were going to talk about jobs. You haven't been drinking by any chance?' But there was nothing but friendly mockery in the question.

'Only whisky,' said Ford 'And that was yesterday. With the chairman of my board of directors.'

'The chairman of your board?' she said. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Listen and I'll tell you,' he said 'I bought old Sammy's sword because I heard Sir Horatio Manners was up here on business, and Sir Horatio was the father of my company commander—him that was killed at Wipers. And I knew the old feller collected swords—and I knew he'd been in Sammy's regiment. So I bought the sword off Sammy and I gave it to Manners.'

'Gave it to a bloke with pots of money?' she asked.

'That's right,' he said. 'And I talked about his son. You know, buttering him up.'

'Told him lies, you mean.'

'I didn't have to,' said Ford. 'The truth did fine. The captain was a nice feller. Seemed he liked me an'all. I had a bit of luck there. He'd written and told his father so.'

She tried to withdraw from his arms but he held her to him. 'And then Sir what's-his-name took pity on you and offered you a job?' she asked. 'Jack –that's no better than begging.'

Ford smiled. 'That's the way I had it planned right enough,' he said, 'but it wasn't the way it happened. He was

on to me in the first five minutes—maybe on to me as soon as he got the letter I wrote to him before I went.'

'In that case, I'm surprised he didn't have you thrown out.'

'So was I to start with,' said Ford. 'Then the penny dropped. There we were, talking away, as nice as pie, smoking cigarettes and me drinking whisky and him drinking sherry, and the whole thing was just an examination.

'Examination of what?' she asked.

'Me,' said Ford.

'What did he want to know about?'

'Me brains,' said Ford. 'Whether I had any or not. How well I can talk. What lies I could get away with. How ruthless I could be if I had to be.'

'And did you pass this examination?'

'With honours,' said Ford. 'He says he can use me.'

'Doing what?'

'Selling,' said Ford.

'You're going to be a tallyman and knock on doors?'

'Wholesale selling, love,' he said. 'First Division stuff. Drinks with the directors, dinner with the sales manager, slipping the mayor a Havana cigar.'

'He really offered you that?' said Jessie.

'Aye,' said Ford, 'he did. You could have knocked me down with a feather.'

He kissed her then and she returned his kiss. 'You could always knock me down with a feather,' said Ford, and drew her to him again.

'Wait, Jack,' she said. 'Let's finish this first.'

'All right,' he said, and they sat down side by side on the horsehair sofa that was Bella's pride and joy.

'But why did he pick you, Jack?' she asked.

'Well, for a start I'm dead common,' Ford began, and she would have argued this but he continued over her protests: 'and so are the blokes I'll be selling to. I'll just be one of the lads, so Sir Horatio says.'

'But you've had no education,' she said.

'Oh, we are snobbish today,' said Ford. 'Are you and Billy the only ones who've been educated?'

'You know I didn't mean—' she said.

'And anyway you're wrong,' said Ford. 'Old Horatio reckons I've got the best education possible. I'm a skilled fitter—and I was a sergeant in the army.'

She said, bewildered, 'What on earth has that got to do with it?'

'So was he,' said Ford, 'and we can both spot a malingerer at a hundred yards.'

'And yell at him,' she said.

'Or give him the sack,' said Ford.

'You'll do that?' she asked.

'Aye.'

'You're climbing high, Jack,' she said.

'Long way to fall, you mean? Don't worry, bonny lass. I've always had a good head for heights.'

'He's paying you well?' she asked.

'Three months' trial at seven quid a week, then I go straight to £450 a year—and expenses, of course.'

'Of course,' said Jessie. 'And where will we live?—Corbridge?' She had only mentioned Corbridge, he knew, because to her it was the epitome of riches; the place where the posh people lived who commuted to business in Newcastle. That was all it was and yet it was hard not to respond to the word.

At last he said, 'You don't get jobs like that round here. We'll live in London.'

'London?' she said. 'I've never been there.'

'I have,' he said. 'On leave. You'll like it. I know I did.'

'But what about mam and dad?' Jessie asked.

'We can still help them,' he said. 'We can help Tom and Mary too—and Billy. 450 a year, Jessie.'

It seemed that the money was not her main preoccupation.

'Will you have to do a lot of that—sacking people, I mean?'

'Seems likely,' said Ford.

He lit a cigarette, and as usual was having trouble in finding an ashtray. She rose and brought him a weird object, covered in blue roses, that might have been a vast saucer or a shallow bowl. Inside it was labelled, a present from Whitley Bay.

'I can't use that,' he said. 'It's your mam's best.'

'For heaven's sake, Jack,' she said, 'let's get on.'

'But that's it,' he said.

'Oh no it's not,' she said. 'What about the unions?'

'What about them?'

'If you're going to start sacking people, won't you be in trouble with the unions?'

'I doubt it,' he said. 'Old Horatio doesn't use much union labour. Not if he can help it.' He smiled. 'Funny that. He was talking about opening up round here. I don't think he will after what I had to say.'

'You talked him out of it?' she asked.

'I think so,' said Ford.

'Jack, how could you?' she asked. 'This place is crying out for jobs.'

There was logic, he thought, and there was emotion. You could have one or the other, but you couldn't mix them. Even so he tried.

'Folks will only get Horatio's jobs on Horatio's terms,' he said. 'And he won't have unions.'

He was losing her again and he knew it, but he made one more try. Gently he said, 'I know myself, bonny lass, and I know I'm not the one you're looking for to change the system. All I can do is join it—and get you a nice house with a maid maybe—and a car to take you to the golf course on Sundays.'

But it was too late for gentleness; her thoughts were only for the sufferings of her own people.

'And work with scabs!' she said. 'And be a boss scab yourself. You're no better than Tom, Jack Ford. In fact you're a damn sight worse.'

Once again what hurt her most was that the bewilderment

in his face was genuine. 'What on earth are you on about?' he asked.

'You'd better go,' she said.

16

It had been an exhausting shift. His muscles had weakened through lack of food and lack of use, but like the others he gritted his teeth and soldiered on and filled the number of tubs demanded of him. Now it was over, and his whole body quivered with the exertions demanded of it. Even as he crawled away from the face he could feel the shivering continue, and even when the exhaustion eased, he was still shaking. There were still the men at the surface to face. Coming up might be safer than going down—after all, his face was black with coal dust, the features indecipherable—but even so the picket by the gates was made up of his own mates and there was always a chance that one might recognise him, even through the mask of coal. Wearily he crawled into the cage and sat cross-legged with the others to wait until they rapped to bank and the cage swooped effortlessly upwards.

On top it was cold. It was always cold once you'd come from below and he pulled his coat more tightly round him, tightened his scarf, then blended into the midst of his fellow blacklegs, seeking anonymity. In the colliery yard the police were waiting and formed up around them to escort them to the bus. This time there was no trouble in getting through: the picket yielded, and the gates swung up, and as they boarded the bus the picket began to jostle, until the police intervened, and even then they kept up their rhythmic chant: 'Scab scab scab scab scab.'

■

Bella sat in front of the kitchen fire. Usually she could look

forward to a doze at this time, but today the thoughts kept jostling one another and keeping sleep at bay. What was going to happen to Tom? And when would Bill be in work again, and more thankfully: how come Jessie hadn't managed to quarrel with Jack Ford the way she managed to quarrel with all her other young men? For a young woman whose heart ached with compassion for the poor and sick and the needy, her Jessie could be terrible fierce about it. Like being hugged by a lioness ... suddenly the front door banged, then the door to the kitchen opened and Jessie stood framed inside it. Warily Bella turned to face her. Her daughter looked dejected: oh dear God, thought Bella, what now?

'Your tea's ready,' she said, and started to rise to serve it.

'I don't want it,' her daughter said.

'There's a nice bit of fish,' said Bella.

'No thanks, mam,' Jessie said.

'Cup of tea?' Jessie shook her head, but Bella poured one out anyway. She could do with a cup even if nobody else wanted one. She took a sip of it, then asked, 'Been out with Jack have you?'

'You know I have,' said Jessie. 'He's just left.' Bella put down her cup, and then put an arm round her daughter.

'And I know you've had a row with him an'all,' she said. 'Jessie, Jessie—that's no way to keep a man like Jack Ford.' She tried to look into her daughter's face, but Jessie turned away.

'A real man is Jack,' said Bella. 'Bonny lad, and a grand one for making you laugh. He could have any girl he wanted —but you were the lucky one.' Jessie moved away.

'Lucky?' she said.

Bella went back to her tea. 'Take a look in the mirror, me bairn,' she said. 'You're not exactly plain, but you're no Mary Pickford, are you? There's times I've wondered what he sees in you. But I think I know all the same.'

'Do you?' said Jessie, and her mother's heart ached at the bitterness in her voice, but even so Bella forced herself to sit

down and sip her tea, keep her voice matter of fact. With Jessie that was the only way.

'You've got spirit, Jessie,' she said, 'and you're frightened of nowt and you stand by your family. And you're an honest girl, honest all through, even when honesty hurts. And Jack admires that more than anything else.'

Her daughter turned to her then. 'You think Jack's like that?' she asked.

'I know he's not,' said Bella, 'and so do you. That's why he wants you, me bairn. So some of that honesty might rub off on him.'

'I doubt it, mam,' said Jessie.

'It wouldn't hurt to try,' said Bella. 'There's two Jacks, Jessie —there's the big laughing lad who would give you the shirt off his back -and there's clever Jack, crafty Jack, who would hammer you flat if you got in his way.'

Jessie thought of Jack giving the old woman a Woodbine; thought of him working for Sir Horatio Manners and sacking anybody who couldn't stand up to him. That was the way Jack was; it would be a superhuman task to change that.

'Do you honestly think I could stop him being the way he is?' she asked.

Bella said, 'Not the road you're going. There's times I've wondered if you've forgotten you're a woman. When did he last kiss you properly?'

'Please, mam,' said Jessie.

But Bella continued inexorably: 'When did you last make him want to?'

■

It was against everything he held sacred for Bill to enter a scab's house, but he'd struck his son Tom and must make amends. Besides, of all his children, Tom was the one he was closest to—despite his pride in the others—because Tom was the one he worked with, Tom was the one he trusted with his life every day, when times were normal and there was work

to be had. Besides, Tom was his son and he loved him for that fact alone, and Mary was as dear to him as Tom: he couldn't bear to think of her left in the hands of neighbours when he was doing nothing, and so he'd gone over to sit with her, to warm up her dinner and play with the bairn, change it and make sure that it had its milk from the bottle Mary had long since been incapable of feeding the boy herself, and in any case—would it be safe for her to do so? Bill's ideas on that, as on any topic of disease, were hazy. At fifty he was short, stocky and strong, and he'd never had a day's illness in his life. Sickness for him had the peculiar horror it holds for those who have never experienced it, but even so he stayed with Mary, because it was his duty, and because it was a labour of love.

As always when sitting relaxed, he remembered the good times, the times when they had all been happy because work was plentiful; the war and the years just before it.

'By,' he said, 'they were grand times then. Every man of us in work. I bought a piano, I remember. Our Billy could play it lovely.'

'And Tom?' Mary asked.

'No,' said Bill. 'All he could think about was football. Daft on it he was. There was a talent scout for Sunderland after him once.'

'Did he really play for Sunderland?' said Mary. 'Nobody ever told me.'

Bill Seaton thought, poor Tom, always going somewhere but never quite arriving, whether it's marriage or football.

Gently he said, 'He never followed it up. A chancy life football, Mary. You're finished before you've hardly started. Tom wasn't having that.'

As he spoke there were footsteps on the stairs and Tom came into the bedroom, still in his dirty work clothes but with his face and hands scrubbed clean. 'Oh,' he said. 'It's you.' He went straight past his father, bent, and kissed his wife. 'How are you, pet?' he asked.

'All right,' said Mary.

'You'll be all the better on pay day,' said Tom. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

Bill Seaton said, 'Tom—'

Still looking at his wife, Tom said, 'Yes, da?'

'I said I was sorry,' said Bill, 'and I meant it. What more can I say?' Tom shrugged, not looking round. 'You all right?' said Bill.

'So far.'

'How did you manage?' Bill asked.

'A bus,' said Tom. 'They drive us there and back in a bus.'

'To your door?' Bill asked.

'We're not that daft,' said Tom. 'First they take us to a place where we can wash our faces and hands so that nobody can see we've been working, then we get back on and I drop off when nobody's looking and dodge me way back here.'

'If anybody spots you—' said Bill.

'Aye,' said Tom. 'I know.' He took Mary's hands in his. 'But she'll get milk and eggs every day.'

*

In history they were learning about the Romans, and that lesson Jessie was telling them about Hadrian's Wall. The class sat in rigid rows of desks, arms folded in front of them. The desks themselves were battered and much used, with tip-up bench seats that clattered noisily unless you were very very careful. It was against school rules to allow seats to clatter ... the room they sat in was painted brown to the level of their shoulders and then green above, a gloomy room that Jessie had done her best to lighten with pictures pinned up on the walls, pictures full of excitement and interest, the kind that could get children talking. On the walls too were the pictures that they had painted themselves, inept for the most part, but executed with a sometimes astonishing innocence of eye. The class liked Miss Seaton; you knew where you stood with her.

Chew sweets or back answer and she'd clout you, on the other hand when she told you a story it was as good as the pictures. She was telling stories about the Romans now, telling stories and asking questions.

Pinned to a blackboard was a picture of the Roman Wall, a reconstruction of it as it had once been, with a portrait of a Roman legionary in the foreground, and a sentry on look-out on one of the wall's towers. She indicated the picture with a pointer. 'The Romans built that wall,' she said. 'Now— who can tell me who the Romans were?'

A few hands went cautiously up and Jessie took one at random. 'Well, George?'

'Fellers with swords and big helmets, miss. They used to throw Christians to the lions,' said George.

Jessie said, 'They did a bit more than that, George,' and the class knew that in some way George had erred. The hands went up again and she chose another boy.

'Can you tell us, Andy?'

'Roads, miss,' said Andy. 'They built roads. And always dead straight.'

'That's right,' said Jessie. 'Now has anybody seen one?' This was obviously a trick question; the class sat still and then at last, almost reluctantly, a solitary hand went up.

'You've seen a Roman road, Walter?' said Jessie.

Doggedly Walter said, 'Yes, miss.'

'Where?' Jessie asked.

'At me granda's, miss,' said Walter.

The class roared.

'That's enough,' said Jessie and the laughter stopped at once. 'Where does your granda live, Walter?' she asked.

'Chollerford, miss,' said Walter. 'The road leads straight past his cottage. He says it's called the Military Road and the Romans made it.'

Jessie said, 'He's quite right. They did. Nearly nineteen hundred years ago. Now who can tell me what military means?'

Once again the scholarly Andy put up his hand and she nodded.

'Please, miss,' he said, 'it's to do with soldiers.'

'That's right,' said Jessie, 'and the Roman soldiers built the road just like they built their wall. And the wall's not far away either. Can anybody tell me the name of a place near here with "wall" in it?'

Every hand in the class went up and she picked at random. 'Well—George,' she asked.

George, a worrier, said doubtfully, 'Wallsend, miss, but—'

'But what, George?' she asked

'There's no Romans there, miss,' said George, in a voice of utter certainty. 'That's where me auntie lives.'

The class loved it, and she had to call out twice for silence.

'The Romans lived there a long time ago,' she said at last. 'I don't think they'd recognise Wallsend now, but it's the place where the wall finished all the same. That's why they called it Wallsend.'

As she spoke she looked around the class. The fat boy, Leslie Jackson, was absorbed in something hidden under his book. Jessie sighed. Why did it always have to be Leslie Jackson? Swiftly and silently she moved over to him and knocked away the book. Beneath it was a pile of cigarette cards.

'Got any swops?' Jessie asked.

Leslie Jackson turned pale and shrank away, a much bigger reaction than one she would have expected just for playing with illicit cigarette cards. The class roared with laughter and again she had to call for silence. In those days laughter in class was a luxury little indulged in, but to laugh at suffering was something she would not under any circumstances permit. Even so, Leslie Jackson had to pay for what he had done.

'Hand them over,' she said.

The fat boy's hands closed feebly round the cards: flags of all nations, racing motor cars, stars of the silver screen.

'Please, miss,' he said, 'they're not mine, miss.'

'Oh!' said Jessie. 'Pinched them, did you?'

'They're me brother's, miss,' Leslie Jackson said. 'He gave me a lend of them.'

Inexorably Jessie held out her hand. Leslie Jackson said pitifully, 'He'll belt us, miss.'

'He might not be the only one,' said Jessie. 'Hand them over.'

The fat boy still clutched the cards: for a moment it seemed as if he was about to burst into tears.

'I'm waiting, Leslie,' said Jessie.

Then the fat boy erupted: his mood changed from terror to rage and crimson blotches appeared on his cheeks. His fists tightened round the cigarette cards and he made a clumsy, fat boy's dash to the door. Jessie grabbed him by the ear and pulled him to her. If she lost this battle she had lost the whole war; the class would never be so easy to control again, and both she and the class knew it. Leslie Jackson squealed with rage and pain.

'I don't have to do what you say,' he said at last.

'Don't you?' she said and twisted his ear.

'No, I don't,' said the fat boy, almost incoherent with rage. 'Me da says your brother's a scab.'

She slapped him then, an open-handed smack across his fat cheek that was a purely instinctive reaction to something the fat boy knew nothing about: fear for her family, and menace for Tom. Leslie Jackson began to cry, partly from pain at the slap and partly because of a dim awareness of a force released in the woman in front of him that neither he nor the class could comprehend.

'Hand over those cards,' said Jessie and her voice was shaking. This time the fat boy obeyed her.

'Now go and sit down,' she said, and once again Leslie Jackson did as she bade him, but he sat immobile, not seeing her or the blackboard, simply staring. But Jessie hadn't finished with him yet; in a trial of strength like this her victory must be total. 'And not another word out of you this day—' she said, 'otherwise you can go straight to Mr. Ashton. Now then.'

The fat boy continued to stare, not seeing in front of him as she turned back to face the class. She waited for a moment for the tremor in her voice to still, and sat. 'We were talking about Wallsend and how it got its name. Who can tell me please?'

The class sat in silence, staring straight ahead.

'George?' said Jessie, 'Walter? Andy?' But not even Andy had anything to say, and one by one they shook their heads. Because of what Tom had done she had lost them. 'Very well,' she said at last. 'Sum books out.'

The class knew that the strength in her was greater than theirs, and did not dare disobey. The desk lids opened in silence, and sum books appeared, and the desk lids closed.

'You can all do long division till you get your tongues back,' Jessie Seaton said, then opened her own desk lid that hid her from the class and wiped her eyes.

17

He sat in the tin bath in front of the fire, a ritual he had undergone hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, first in his mother's house and then in his own, and watched the water turn grey as the coal dust came free of his body. Getting rid of the muck, feeling clean, should have been a positive pleasure for him, as it had been in the past when he and his father had worked alongside each other, but now it was a ritual no more, just a necessary preparation before he could spend some time with Mary. His father sat in the chair by the fire and watched his son clean himself; even among pitmen Tom had always been a fanatic for cleanliness. He took a flannel from his son's hand and began to wash the dust from his back; Tom grunted his appreciation.

'I thought you'd come home clean,' Bill said at last. 'People's bound to spot you with all that dust on you.'

'You don't think they'd put baths in the pit just for us, do you?' said his son. 'They let us wash our faces and hands and that's all.'

'So nobody'll know you're scabbing?' said Bill.

'That's right.'

Tom stood up at last, stepped free of the bath and began to dry himself in front of the fire. There was no sensation of false modesty between the two men; Tom's nakedness was natural; he had been dirty and now he was clean.

'How much they paying?' his father asked.

'What they offered before the strike,' said Tom.

Bill grimaced. 'You won't get fat on that,' he said.

'And we won't starve neither,' Tom Seaton said, and finished

drying his body, reached for the vest among the clothes warming in front of the fire.

'Are they all local men who are doing this?' his father asked.

Tom Seaton stared at him, a long, appraising look.

Bill said defensively, 'I haven't come to spy. I'm just asking.'

His son shrugged. He owed the men he worked with no loyalty, felt no need to keep their secrets. He was doing what had to be done, and there was no help for it, but he was doomed, and he knew it.

'There's all sorts,' he said at last. 'Scots and Welsh, and blokes from down south. Even a few Paddys. There aren't many from round here.'

'Thank God,' Bill Seaton said.

But his son continued as if his father had not spoken. 'And the ones that are from round here,' he said at last, 'they're in the same boat as me. Sick wives, sick bairns.' He pulled on his trousers and his father handed him the belt that had been lying coiled on the mantel shelf. In better days it had been Mary who had scrubbed his back, handed him his clothes . . .

'Have you thought what you'll do when the strike's settled?' Bill asked.

'Aye,' said his son; just that, no more. It seemed to Tom that his father had left him, was making noises with his mouth rather than talking, and did even that only for pity's sake; pity for Mary.

'What will you do then?' his father asked.

'Move away from here,' Tom Seaton said. 'What else can I do?'

The idea was appalling to both of them. Pit families lived together and stayed together, always in reach of each other, always there when needed; father looking out for son until in the fullness of time the father aged and the son took care of the father. That was the way life was for them, and even to contemplate breaking that pattern was unthinkable, and yet here they were discussing it without wonder in their voices, without even rage.

'You mean you'll emigrate?' Bill asked.

His son laughed. There was bitterness in his laughter.

Bill Seaton thought his son was not entitled to such a display: his son was a scab. Bitterness was his father's prerogative.

'You need money for emigrating,' said Tom. 'I thought about trying the Midlands—there's a lot more jobs there from what I hear.'

'Motor cars?' said Bill. 'What the heck do you know about motor cars?'

In a minute, thought Tom, he'll be telling me once a pitman always a pitman, and yet he doesn't want me to be a pitman either.

'And what about Mary and the bairn?' said Bill.

'They'll come with me,' said Tom.

'She's not fit to travel.'

'I wouldn't leave her here, da,' Tom said, 'not once the strike's over. She's not staying here to pay my debts.'

'You ma and me'll look after her,' Bill Seaton said.

Hostages thought Tom, he wants me wife and bairn for bloody hostages—to make sure I'll come back. Come back to what? He turned and looked at his father and thought, maybe I was wrong. He loves Mary and the bairn. He just can't bear to be parted from them.

More gently he said, 'You'll be in enough trouble with a scab for a son without having a scab's wife living in your house.'

*

School was over for the day, and once more the prison emptied. Once more the little inmates poured out to enjoy their parole until next morning. In the schoolyard impromptu games of football began as boys kicked and dribbled their way to the gates. Slowly, at a more dignified pace as befitted their rank of wardens, the headmaster, Ashton, and his teachers eased their way through the yelling mob. Usually the schoolyard had emptied by the time the teachers appeared, school

and yard alike full with a kind of silence that denotes total absence of people; a silence totally different from that of a school full with children, no matter how disciplined; but today when Jessie emerged last of all, there were still children clustered around the school gates and in the street, the avenue to freedom, that lay beyond. These children were hers; her class and the children of other classes that she taught from time to time; the children she had worked hard to reach, to encourage, to coax into the belief that there was a world beyond school, beyond shipyard and pit, and Gallowshield. And they had responded to it, perhaps in their own way even loved her for it, but today there was no love in their faces, none of that shining admiration that she had begun insensibly to take for granted. Today there were no games, no football: today they were all Gallowshield, their fathers' sons. The chanting began whilst she was still crossing the yard, and followed her through the gates and into the street, a chorus of children's voices saying softly and rhythmically, 'Scab scab scab scab scab.'

She walked on, looking neither to right nor left, but as she drew further away the chant grew louder, more tribal: 'Scab scab scab scab scab.'

She had to get to Tom at once, to warn him. What he could do about it she had no idea, but at least he had to be warned. She took a tram and literally shivered with impatience each time it stopped. She had to get to Tom, to tell him to get away. When she left its lurching clatter at last she found herself running down the street, and that wouldn't do either. A woman running was an object of conspicuousness, and maybe someone would recognise her, someone who knew that she was Tom's sister. She forced herself to walk and strode out briskly until she reached Tom's back door. The lane was deserted and she hurried in silently and went through the door that led to the kitchen.

'Tom—' she said. But there was only her father there, sitting in front of the fire, and sucking on an empty pipe. He looked at her, and seemed at once to sense the terror that she felt.

'Jessie!' he said. 'What in the world ?'

'Where's Tom,' said Jessie. 'Is he with Mary?'

'No, Mary's asleep,' said Bill. 'Tom went out.'

'Out?' she said dully.

'To the doctor's,' her father said. 'He got paid today. He's gone to get some medicine.'

'Oh dear God,' she said. 'It would have to be something for Mary.'

'You'd better tell me,' Bill Seaton said.

'They know about him, dad,' said Jessie. 'They know our Tom's a scab.'

'You're sure?' said Bill.

'Even the children know,' said his daughter. 'It was one of the kids in my class who told me ... I'd better go to the doctor's and warn him. Where is it?'

'Over at the other end of town somewhere,' said Bill. 'I don't know.'

'Well what's his name?' said Jessie.

'Johnson, was it? Or Thompson? I don't remember.'

She was almost incoherent with fear for her brother. 'Dad, you must remember,' she said at last.

Her father looked at her, helpless. 'It's no good, lass,' he said, 'I can't. We've always gone to Dr. Frazer, but Tom reckoned he wasn't doing Mary any good. Somebody told him about this new feller—only I can't remember his name.' He paused and said again, 'I can't remember his name.'

They stood and looked at one another, appalled by his lapse of memory.

'And anyway,' Bill said at last, 'I told him to stop and have a drink on the way back. God knows he needs one after a day down by—and after what he's been through the last few days. I told him there was no hurry -I'd sit with Mary'

'Did he say which pub?' said Jessie and Bill shook his head, despairing.

'No,' he said. 'He didn't. I wouldn't know where to start looking.' He looked at Jessie. 'Bad for you, was it?'

'Even my own class,' she said. 'Kids I've taught for months—ones I thought liked me—trusted me—and I'm only his sister.' She thought for a moment. 'There's only one thing for it, dad,' she said at last. 'I'd better go for the police.'

Even with his own son at risk Bill Seaton was horrified. 'Jessie—you can't,' he said.

'I've got to,' she said. 'You know what'll happen.'

'Aye,' said Bill. 'I know what'll happen if we bring the bobbies into it an'all. We'd all have to pay for that, Jessie, and you know it.'

'But we've got to do something,' she said. 'We can't just sit here.'

Bill Seaton thought for a moment. Tom was a big and healthy man, but there wouldn't be one big healthy man ranged against him. That wasn't the way it worked; not for scabs. To cope with this situation needed ruthlessness, ingenuity and a cold and calculating courage he no longer possessed.

'Go and get Jack,' he said.

'Jack and I aren't speaking,' said Jessie.

'Then go and bloody make him speak,' her father said. But still she stood immobile; what had passed between her and Jack Ford had seemed to her to be final, irretrievable.

'Jessie,' her father said. 'It's for your own brother . . .'

He'd be in the 'Bluebell', she knew, if he had any money at all, and anyway it was on the way to his lodgings. Her father was right and she knew it, but even so the thought of asking for help from this man at such a time appalled her; and even if he wasn't a pitman he was a worker too—or had been. Surely to God he'd hate scabs the way the pitmen hated them. And then she remembered what she'd called him: 'You're no better than a boss scab yourself.' Maybe a boss scab might take pity on his underlings: at least she had to ask, for Tom's sake, and Mary's. This time she'd beg if she must.

She reached the 'Bluebell' and looked inside, went into the public bar. Women like her had no business in public bars: women in presentable clothes, proper coats and hats, went into

the snug, if they went into pubs at all. But Jack wouldn't be in the snug. She moved across to the bar ignoring the stares of the men seated at tables, drinking. Jack stood by the bar; he had money all right. He was drinking whisky. An advance from that Sir Horatio Manners, she wondered, and hated the thought of what was to happen to Jack Ford even as she prepared to flee. Softly she called out, 'Jack.'

He took his time turning to face her. 'Hullo,' he said. 'Bit of a comedown for you, isn't it? Visiting a public bar to run after boss scabs.'

'I need your help, Jack,' she said.

'To change the system?' he asked. 'Let me get you a glass of port and we'll talk about it.'

She said urgently, 'It's Tom. They've found out about Tom.'

He shrugged. 'I told you they would,' he said and turned back to the bar.

'They'll—hurt him,' she said, but he wouldn't turn to face her.

'We all get hurt sooner or later,' he said. 'Maybe one day you'll find that's true.'

And that's as near as he'll ever be to admitting that I've the power to hurt him, she thought, and at any other time it would be a wonderful thing to know, at any other time I could tell him how sorry I am and get him back, but this time it has to be for Tom. '*You* could stop it,' she said and realised that it was true. He *could* stop it. How, she had no idea, but she could sense the power in the man, the controlled force that could take on even more formidable tasks than rescuing Tom from the wrath of his fellows.

'And get hurt meself?' said Ford. She moved up to the bar to stand beside him, put her hand on his shoulder and turned him to face her. He allowed himself to be moved, and looked down into her eyes.

'Jack,' she said. 'Please.'

He said wonderingly, 'I never heard you beg before. And you don't even do that for yourself.'

'You'll come?' she asked.

He finished his whisky. 'Wait here,' he said, and headed for the door.

'Here?' she said. 'I can't. You know I can't.' He smiled at her; there was mockery in his glance for the prudery she felt; perhaps there was cruelty there too. Now she was being punished for the things she said by being made to wait in a public bar.

'You'll have to, pet,' he said. 'I can hardly take you back to me lodgings, now can I?' Then he was gone...

■

Tom hadn't really enjoyed his drink: in a strange pub with no mates around him there was very little enjoyment; but he didn't dare go where he was known and produce money when all his mates were on strike. Still, the beer had had its effect; deadening emotion, softening the worry about Mary, about what da thought of him—and ma. He'd maybe had a bit more than he should, and for the rest of the week he'd have to go without, but at least tonight he'd had his drink and the world had lost some of its ability to hurt. He clutched the medicine bottle in his hand and walked up the back lane towards his door. There had been comfort in the new doctor, a young man with a brisk ability about him who had treated the fact of T.B. with impatience rather than resignation. There was comfort in that impatience: it reduced a terrifying and deadly disease to an enemy that could be recognised, and once recognised, outwitted, perhaps even conquered. As he walked up the lane he tried to formulate these thoughts into words as the doctor had done: words like that would give Mary hope, and hope to her at this moment was as important as the medicine he carried in his hand.

Then the first figure stepped from the cover of the back door next to his, a face he didn't know, a man he'd never seen, but he sensed the menace in it even so. 'Scab!' the first one said, and Tom whirled, his feet slithering on the

cobblestones to face a second figure, another unknown. 'Scab!' He turned to make a bolt down the back lane but the third man was already there, waiting. 'Scab!' Three young hard strangers, because strangers would do a better job; friends might remember old times and be too gentle. Tom took a deep breath and ran at the third man. It was his only hope—to frighten this one and get away before the others could intercept him. But the beer slowed him up and the medicine bottle in his hand bewildered him. There was no time to put it in his pocket, and to let it fall was unthinkable. The medicine was for Mary; it had cost a lot of money. The third man grabbed Tom around the arms and held him as the other two ran up, grabbed him and forced him with his back against the wall, holding him there till a fourth man appeared from the shadows. The fourth man was the picket leader, and the only one Tom recognised: he was to be the judge; the other three, Tom knew, were the executioners.

'Move him into the light,' the picket leader said and they hustled him beneath the rays of a gas lamp.

'Is he Tom Seaton, Andy?' the picket leader asked and the young miner who held his left arm said, 'Aye. That's him.'

'Maybe you don't know Andy here,' the picket leader said, 'but he knows you. What's more he saw you. This morning. You crossed a picket line, Seaton. You scab.'

'Look,' said Tom, 'you've got it wrong. I had to. My wife's ill.'

'Bloody liar,' said the picket leader and struck the first blow himself. Almost as appalling as the beating he received was the fact that Mary's bottle was knocked from his hands, smashed to pieces on the cobblestones. And then the blows intensified ... It was a savage and methodical beating that had nothing to do with a fight in anger; this was his sentence. Tom struggled and managed to land one good blow but they were too much for him; the beating continued until even the thought of Mary was knocked out of him and there was noth-

ing but pain. Suddenly the man who held his right arm pitched forward unconscious and Tom was aware of Jack Ford standing behind him, in his hand the handle of a miner's pick, the weapon Jack Ford had once used against the policeman all those weeks ago in Hexham. The picket leader whirled and Jack Ford jabbed with the pick handle at his stomach, a blow hard enough to double him up till he fell on his knees, retching on the cobblestones. Ford moved into the lamplight and then faced the other two men. All three of them were fully aware that he would use the pick handle again if he had to.

'Let him go,' said Ford and they obeyed him at once. Tom staggered away and clung to the lamp-post, willing himself not to fall. One of the two risked a quick glance towards the welcome blackness of the lane, and Ford stepped at once between him and escape.

'The first one that moves,' he said, 'I'll break his arm.' They stood still.

'Who's in charge of you four heroes?' Ford asked.

One of the two unhurt looked across to the picket leader who now knelt and rubbed his stomach. 'Him,' he said.

The picket leader somehow managed to stumble to his feet. 'One of these days you'll be sorry you interfered,' he said.

Ford slapped the pick handle on to his palm; the sound it made was like bone breaking.

'Not while I've got this,' he said. 'Now—you two, bugger off—and take the sleeping beauty with you.'

The two sound men knelt to pick up the one Ford had hit first; he was still unconscious as they carried him along the lane. Still facing the picket leader, Ford said, 'Can you manage to get inside, Tom?' He risked a quick glance to where Tom clung to the lamp-post.

'I can manage,' said Tom and moved to his back door, walking stiff-legged, like a drunk, but walking. Ford grabbed the picket leader by the shoulder and pushed him in after Tom Seaton.

'You're coming an'all,' he said. 'There's something I want you to see.'

*

Jessie and Bill were in the kitchen. Inevitably they had questions—it was strange to him how people always had questions. They never knew that once action had started you went on with it until it finished—either that or you lost.

'Later,' he said. 'Just look after Tom here, he needs it,' and hustled the picket leader up the narrow staircase that led to Mary's bedroom She lay asleep. Thank God the beating had been a silent one, and Tom hadn't cried out, not once; there was good stuff in Tom; good stuff and a hell of a lot of bad luck. 'That's his wife,' Jack Ford said.

The picket leader glanced briefly at the bed then turned away.

'Go and take a look at her,' said Ford, but the picket leader made no move. Ford jabbed the pick handle into his back and the picket leader gasped.

'Take a look,' said Ford. 'A good look.'

The picket leader went up close to the bed, glanced down and Mary woke, said immediately, 'Tom?'

Ford slipped the pick handle up his sleeve out of sight and went quickly to the bed.

'Tom's downstairs, Mary,' he said, 'having a bit of a chat with his da. This is a mate of his from the Lodge. He just looked in to see how you were getting on.'

'From the Lodge?' said Mary. She knew all about the Lodge; the Lodge meant the union, and the union meant trouble. Suddenly she began to cough; the coughs racked her whole body till at last she had to put her handkerchief up to her mouth. Her handkerchief was already stained red.

'Will there be—any trouble?' she managed to say at last.

'No, Mrs. Seaton,' said the picket leader. 'I thought there would. But I was wrong.' His voice was gentle.

Jack Ford said, equally gently, 'Jessie's waiting to see you. I'll send her up.'

He moved to the door and motioned to the picket leader to precede him. Mary called out, 'Jack!' He turned to her, smiling. 'There really won't be any trouble?' she asked.

Jack looked at the picket leader. 'You've got his word for it,' he said.

Downstairs Jessie was bathing Tom's bruises. They had concentrated on the body at first, saving the face until last so that apart from a bruise on one cheek he had little visible markings, but his body was already turning black and blue. Jessie looked up as Jack came downstairs with the picket leader 'I suppose you're proud of what you've done?' said Jessie.

Talk, thought Ford. Always talk. And the wrong sort of talk ... This still isn't finished.

'That's enough, Jessie,' he said aloud. 'Go and see to Mary.'

She hesitated, and Ford said, 'She needs you,' and Jessie went at once. Bill Seaton walked up to the picket leader; that they knew each other was obvious.

'Well, Davey?' Bill said.

The picket leader said, 'I suppose you want me to say I'm wrong. Well I am ... but why didn't he come to the Lodge, man? There's a bit put by for a hardship fund.'

'Maybe my son didn't want charity,' said Bill.

The picket leader said, 'Maybe that's all that's left. I've told his wife there'll be no trouble—and there won't. Not as long as she's alive. By the looks of her that won't be for long'

Jack Ford said, 'You're a great one for tact, aren't you?' and looked at Tom.

The picket leader said, 'I was forgetting the bodyguard. Are you a miner by any chance?'

'Do I look that daft?' said Ford.

'If I was you I'd hang on to that pick handle,' said the picket leader.

Ford said genially, 'Stomach still sore, is it?'

The picket leader looked at Ford and shook his head in bewilderment. 'Four of us—' he said. 'You took all the bloody four. I'd never have believed it.'

Though there was bewilderment in his voice, there was admiration too; the atmosphere had changed to one of relaxation, almost of cosiness. Tom dispelled all that.

'Bugger off,' he said. The picket leader looked at Tom and became aware of the hatred in the younger man's eyes. You do what you can, the picket leader thought, you try to keep the strike a hundred per cent, and you make mistakes—there are casualties But of course there were casualties; this was a war, and he was a miner not a general. He made mistakes and people got hurt.

'I'll be back with your hardship money,' he said.

'Don't bother.'

'Use your brains, man,' the picket leader said. 'You can't go on scabbing—'

'Don't worry. I'm finished with that,' said Tom. 'I'm finished with the whole lot of you.'

*

Jessie and Jack sat together in the Seatons' front room. She wanted to talk it over; after the battle they always wanted to talk it over. Even veteran troops, he remembered. Chattering like magpies. Why couldn't they just keep it to themselves? But he was relaxed and easy, as she was.

'You gave them what for, all right,' she said.

'I had to,' said Jack. 'Otherwise they'd have clobbered him.'

'Weren't you frightened?' she asked, and he chuckled.

'You want to know all my secrets, don't you?' he said.

'But weren't you?' she persisted. 'Four men and you, and you on your own?'

Jack Ford said, 'I was terrified.'

'Then why—' she began.

'Because you said please,' he said.

She kissed him then, a kiss that was satisfying to them both. 'And because you enjoyed it as well,' she said.

There was too much truth in that for comfort; better to start a new subject, even if it meant another row.

'Ah, well,' he said. 'It'll be the last time, I daresay. There'll be no need for pick handles in London.'

He waited, anticipating objections, perhaps even outright refusal, but this time she gave in to him. All she said was, 'Will we really have £7 a week coming in?'

'For a start,' he said.

'You mean you'll get more? I thought that was just talk,' she said.

'Talk? I'm going to get a hell of a lot more than just £7 a week.' He looked into her eyes and she could see the dancing excitement in his; it was the way he had looked before the fight. 'I'll tell you something, Jessie,' he said. 'Before I met you I never could be bothered to do anything. But now—' He took her into his arms and held her up in the air—'One of these days I'm going to set you up in a palace.'

And she believed it. Looking down on him like that as he held her, still with that look in his eyes, she would have believed him whatever he had told her.

'You mean it,' she said. 'You really mean it.'

'Of course I do,' he said, and his voice grew more serious, but his eyes still gleamed with excitement. 'What the hell am I doing here, sergeant? I said I'd be at the Savile.'

'That was your friend Sir Horatio's son,' she said.

'That's right,' said Ford. 'Well the poor devil's not a member any more. Maybe I'll get his place.'

'I still wish—' she said, and hesitated. She wished that Jack Ford was on the side of the workers, wished that he was staying in Gallowshield, wished he could see how people like Tom and Mary desperately needed his leadership. But he didn't see it, and she knew no way to persuade him to see it, and most of all she wished to marry him.

'Well?' he said. 'What do you wish?'

'Oh, nothing,' she said. 'I only hope that palace of yours has beer in it if we ever ask mam to stay.'

*

Sir Horatio sat at his ease in the drawing room. The fire was warm but not too hot, the light placed exactly as he wished it so that he could read his *Times* in peace. And his whisky and soda was precisely the mixture he preferred. He'd had a good dinner, and his hosts had gone out to play bridge and left him on his own. They were admirable hosts. He liked solitude and detested bridge. He began to think of Jack Ford and the possibilities that the younger man had to offer. It had taken a war to make Ford realise his full potential, and perhaps even more than a war. Somewhere in Ford's life there would be a woman—in Ford's life there would always be a woman: a man like that couldn't function without them. It was amusing to speculate on what kind of woman she would be; what kind of woman he would change her for because, Manners was quite convinced, Ford needed women for relaxation as he needed power for its own sake. Power was the real key to the man—not women. He was hungry for power, just as he, Manners, had hungered for it until he had acquired it, and then he was hungry for more.

He let *The Times* lie in his lap and looked into the fire. In it he could see the features of Ford and of his dead son: the two images mixed and blurred. His eyes closed...

Dolly came in softly and began to make up the fire, but silent as she was he woke up at once and reached for his newspaper.

'I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sir,' said Dolly.

'That's all right,' said Manners. 'I had no business sleeping at this time of day.'

Softly she replaced the coal tongs and shovel, moved the brass coal scuttle back into its place and prepared to leave.

'Just a minute,' said Manners. 'Are you the girl who was polishing my swords?'

'Yes, sir,' she said.

'You did a good job,' he told her. 'Now let's see what you can make of this one.'

He went to a table by the window and brought over the sword that had once belonged to old Sammy Foster, the sword Jack Ford had given him, and handed it to her.

'It isn't half heavy, sir,' she said.

'That sword is power,' said Manners. 'Power always weighs heavy. Mind you're careful with it, girl. They're very hard to come by.' He smiled, but she knew that he was thinking hard behind the smile. 'Smart young fellow made me a present of that,' he said. 'Very smart.'

'The young man who came to see you this morning, sir?' she asked.

'That's right,' said Manners. 'Know him, do you?'

Dolly said at once, 'Oh no, sir. I just wondered.' She looked more closely at the sword. 'But it's clean, sir,' she said.

'Clean?' said Manners. 'A sword like that should be spotless.' His hand went to his pocket and he gave her a half-a-crown. 'Here,' he said. 'Make sure you do a good job.'

*

He had gone out and left her alone, but he'd been on shift work so often that she was not afraid of her own solitude. There was always the bairn for company. Only this time he hadn't gone to work, how could he? Bill Seaton had been up and explained all that, told her about what the picket leader had said. Hardship money ... and no more scabbing. But her Tom was a proud chap in his own way; he hated charity, hated the need to beg, even from his own family. Jessie had been willing to help, and from what she'd been told even Jack Ford had been willing to help, and he was hardly one of the family yet—but Tom had hated to ask; he'd hate even more to ask from strangers ... he'd had a bruise on his cheek. The picket leader had been kind to her, but he'd been rough with Tom, she sensed it—he and his mates. For a brief interval she hated

them for it, but then the terrible inertia of T.B. set in. There was nothing she could do, nothing at all, except lie there and wonder how Tom was.

And then she heard him in the kitchen. His step was light, careful not to wake her, but she knew his step as she knew the touch of his hands, and waited for him to come to her. Only this time he didn't come though she waited ever so long. Painfully, careful not to cough, she hauled herself from the bed, put a coat over her nightgown and went downstairs.

He was in the kitchen. In front of him on the scrubbed deal kitchen table was a cold chisel, and from his pockets he was producing things. Expensive things. Things she had only seen in jewellers' shop windows: a pair of cufflinks that were made of gold, a silver cigarette case, a ring, and last of all there was a small bundle of notes, and he began carefully to count them. Suddenly she made a sound by the door, a floorboard creaked, and he was on his feet at once, his hand groping for the chisel. Then he looked up and saw her.

'Mary!' he said. 'What on earth— Why are you out of bed?'

'I woke up and you weren't there,' she said. 'I was frightened —lying there all alone .. I began to think maybe you'd left me.' She moved shakily towards him and he took her in his arms: there seemed to be no weight to her body at all.

'Leave you?' he said, and smiled. 'As if I could' But she looked past him to the things on the table, the money in his hand.

'Where did you get it?' she asked. Again he smiled, but this time the smile was bitter. 'The night shift, Mary. I've been on the night shift.'

'You've been stealing,' she said.

'They won't let me work,' said Tom, 'and I'm too proud to beg. But I'm damned if me and mine will starve. There must be thirty quid's worth there, love, and it took me half an hour to get it. A quid a minute. You know what, Mary, working's a mug's game.'

Empire Day on the Slag Heap

18

And then one day it was all over, with a little man, proud, alert, eager as a squirrel, running up the lane, going from door to door and shouting into each back yard, 'Anybody in?' Sometimes it was the woman of the house who answered, and sometimes the man—too bored to go for a walk or pick over the slag heap for usable coal; but whoever it was the dialogue was very much the same.

'Anybody in?'

'Aye . . . what is it?'

'It's over. They've agreed to settle.'

'What? How much for?'

'The delegates have called an Emergency Meeting. You're to get down there now' –or 'Tell your man to go. Everybody's to be there.'

Then the little man would scamper off to the next house and call in at the back door, 'Anybody in?'

■

It was the 24th May, Empire Day, and the day when the school celebrated: the day when the stunted, ragged army of victims remembered victory. Most of the children wore their best clothes, but some of them were in the uniforms of one youth organisation or another: Scouts, Wolf Cubs, Boys' Brigade. Some of them wore sailors' and soldiers' hats which had belonged to their fathers and the army badges, polished furiously for the special day, indicated every regiment in the North East which had seen service in the war, from Tyneside Scottish to Durham Light Infantry. Every child carried a

Union Jack in his hand and there was a large Union Jack run up on the flagstaff in the schoolyard. The headmaster, Mr. Ashton, looked up at it from where he stood As if it were the flagstaff on a fort on the Khyber Pass, thought Jessie, and he was commanding the troops who were going to hold out against the Pathans to the last man. But she and the other teachers went on marshalling children into position. This was a big day for them. A day of speeches, singing, a pageant —and then freedom. At last each class was drawn up in line and the lines were more or less straight. Six of the big boys trundled a small battered piano on wheels into position out there in the open, and Ashton looked down from the flagstaff at last, motioned the half-dozen boys to go to their places. The staff left the children and formed up behind their headmaster. He's loving it, thought Jessie. He's loving every minute. Ashton turned to Mr. Turnbull, the teacher of 4C, an ex-marine still with the look of a warrant officer about him.

'I think we'll make a start now, Mr. Turnbull,' Ashton said.

Turnbull, already at attention, said, 'Yes, sir,' and became even more rigid as he let out a yell that was a real R.S.M.'s.

'School!' he bawled.

At once the children stopped talking, and waited for his orders. You didn't try anything on Mr. Turnbull, least of all on Empire Day.

'School...' Turnbull bawled again. 'Attenshun!' The children obeyed, all moving in a clattering rhythm that was not good enough for Mr. Turnbull.

'As you were,' he bawled. 'Atten-shun ... as you were ... atten-shun,' until at last he was satisfied.

And the thing was that the kids were satisfied too, thought Jessie They're really enjoying themselves. He's treating them like soldiers and they're loving it. They stood rigid, straining, skinny chests pushed out as Turnbull moved forward and examined them class by class, then went back to Ashton and all but saluted.

'School present and correct, sir,' he said.

'Thank you, Mr. Turnbull,' said Ashton, then turned to the

school. 'We will begin as we always do,' he said, 'with that song that tells so much about this England of ours that we know and love so well.'

The slag heaps, thought Jessie, the rows of slum dwellings that make up this England of ours for so many of us. Oh yes, we know it right enough, but do we have to love it, too? Mr. Ashton coughed. 'If you please, Miss Seaton,' he said and Jessie hurried over to the piano and struck up the opening chord. The school drew in its breath; it had been practising for weeks, the sooner they got it right the sooner old Ashton would let them go.

'Land of Hope and Glory,' they sang,
'Mother of the free,
How shall we extol thee
Who are born of thee . . .'

*

The eager little man was now working up the row of houses where Bill Seaton lived, but when he shouted the ritual, 'Anybody in?' It was Bella who answered.

'Aye. Come in,' she said. She was baking and her hands and arms were covered in flour.

'Oh it's you, Dickie,' she said. 'What's up?'

'The strike's settled,' Dickie said.

Bella let the dough fall into the bowl.

'You're kidding,' she said.

'All back on Monday,' said Dickie. 'Where's your Bill?'

'He's just doing a few messages,' Bella said. 'He'll be back in a minute. Ha-way in.'

Dickie said, 'Sorry, Mrs. Seaton, I can't. I've got to pass it on. Tell Bill to get down to the Lodge as sharp as he can.'

He turned to go, but Bella called after him, 'Dickie—how much are they giving us?'

But Dickie was already on his way. 'That'll have to wait until the meeting,' he said.

*

The children had saved their voices for the final chorus, and now it came out shrill and clear:

'Wider still and wider
Shall thy bounds be set:
God who made thee mighty
Make thee mightier yet.
God who made thee mighty
Make thee mightier yet.'

Ashton waited as the last notes died away.

'Very good,' he said. 'Very good indeed. At ease please.'

The children relaxed a very little as Turnbull watched them, and Jessie left the piano and took her place once more among the staff.

Ashton said, 'I don't suppose anybody's in any doubt about what day it is,' and a forest of hands shot up. Ashton smiled, 'I thought not,' he said. 'Well—George Urwin you tell me.'

'Empire Day, sir,' said George.

'And what happens on Empire Day?' said Ashton.

George Urwin said, 'You give us a holiday, sir.'

For a moment Ashton looked angry, then he recovered. He was a stranger here, and the ways of this district were indeed strange to him. Better by far to proceed with the same gentle firmness and hope to show them something of his vision of their country's greatness.

'I do indeed, George,' he said, 'but what I am asking is why?' He tried another smile. 'And as that's rather a difficult question I'd better answer it myself.'

Some of the staff chuckled at this, but neither Jessie nor the children smiled; Jessie because she couldn't approve, she knew, all that was about to be said; the children because they hadn't the remotest idea that a joke had been made.

'This is the day when we remember our Empire,' said Ashton 'The British Empire—the greatest that the world has ever seen, reaching out to every quarter of the globe: Africa,

India, Australia, Canada—and so many more. Places conquered by British arms, and now ruled by British justice. This is the day above all others when we remember we are British —and proud of it.'

Jessie Seaton wondered if British justice applied also to a townful of hungry, workless miners and their families, but Ashton's eyes were on far horizons: the song the school had sung was still his inspiration.

'That is why we have sports today,' he said. 'Why Mr. Gregg has rehearsed you in a pageant and why—as George Urwin has already told us—we have a holiday. But you must remember that holiday originally meant Holy Day –and Empire Day is, in a certain sense, just that. A Holy Day. Our Empire you see is a Holy—even a sacred thing.'

The children had endured this stolidly, but when Ashton had arrived at the fact that a holiday was a Holy Day a new sound obtruded: a low moan rising to a piercing shriek; the sound of a works siren blowing, and that was too much for even the most stolid child. There was an instant buzz of whispered speculation.

Turnbull bawled out, 'Quiet there,' and the whispering died.

Ashton said softly to the staff who stood behind him, 'Why on earth should that thing go off at this hour? Does anyone know?' Jessie thought, he may know all about the Empire, but he knows very little about what's going on under his nose.

'The strike—' she said.

'What about it?' said Ashton.

'It must be over,' she said. 'We must have won.'

*

The sound of the siren had roused the whole town, and the whole town buzzed with speculation. Even Jack Ford, preparing to leave Gallowshield, felt the need to know what had happened, and the quickest way to find out was to go to the 'Bluebell'. Matt Headley would be there, Matt with a foot in both camps, a fitter now working in the pits as a maintenance

man ... He set off for the pub, wondering who had won. It would be nice to leave the town and know that Bill and Tom were secure—until the next time.

He found Matt Headley nursing a half pint of bitter and bought him a pint. Matt took it unsmiling and Ford said, 'You don't seem to be celebrating much.'

'Celebrating?' said Matt. 'The folks round here haven't got much to celebrate this day.'

'Didn't you win then?'

'Win?' Matt Headley said. 'They bloody murdered us.'

Ford took a pull at his beer. 'How much did they get then?' he asked.

'Nowt,' said Matt. 'The employers gave them nowt. Same wages as they struck against eight weeks ago—and bloody lucky to get that to hear the bosses talk. Eight weeks of misery, and all for nowt.'

'It was the same with the engineers,' said Ford.

'Aye,' Matt Headley said, 'but you fellers in the shipyards had the sense to go back. It takes a pitman to do something as daft as this.'

Ford said, 'You think they should have stayed out, Matt? Is that it?'

'I do,' said Headley, 'and a lot of pitmen do an'all. But we're not family men. They're the ones who gave in—and I can't say I blame them.'

Ford finished his beer. 'Have another?' he asked.

'It's my shout,' said Matt.

'Hold on to your money, kidder,' said Ford. 'You're going to need it.' He called out to the barmaid, 'Two pints please.'

'Flush, are you?' Matt Headley asked.

'Just that,' said Ford.

'Flush and not working?'

'Now don't you start getting the wrong ideas,' said Ford. 'Sheep stealing's over. Just now I'm on me holidays.'

Matt Headley looked at him amazed. 'Holidays?' he said. 'Come into money, have you?'

The barmaid brought the drinks over and Ford paid her with a pound note, and Matt was amazed all over again.

'I've got meself a fairy godfather,' said Ford.

*

They had sung, they had been harangued, and they had watched a pageant. That afternoon they would go to the football field and watch their sports, but for the moment it was all over. Once again, the children stood at rigid attention while the boy in the uniform of the Boys' Brigade played the Last Post, and a boy in Scout uniform lowered the Union Jack from the mast. The last notes died away, shrill and piercing, yet achingly sweet. Jessie Seaton looked at Ashton: the man was very close to tears, and so she found was she. I'd better watch myself, she thought, or he'll have me at it too.

The flag fell and the Scout and the Boys' Brigade bugler strutted back to their places.

'If you please, Mr. Turnbull,' said Ashton.

'School!' Turnbull bawled. 'Stand at ease ... atten-shun.'

This time they were so good that even Turnbull could find no fault with them, but that was because they were eager to escape.

'School!' Turnbull bawled again, '—dismiss!' The children turned right, held it for a count of three then broke away running, yelling happily, to the school gates and freedom, before old Ashton could change his mind. The strike was over and the rest of the day until the sports was their own. Life had no more to offer. One of them dropped his Union Jack as he ran and Jessie stooped and picked it up. Ashton turned to her.

'So much for patriotism, Miss Seaton,' he said, but there was more sadness than bitterness in his voice.

'You can't blame them for being happy the strike's over,' said Jessie.

'You really think they understood the significance of that wretched siren?' Ashton asked.

'That's something that everybody understands round here,' Jessie Seaton said.

'Everybody except me, it would seem,' said Ashton. 'Where are you going now? Home?'

'I've got to see the piano put back first,' said Jessie.

'I'm sure Mr. Turnbull will be happy to do that for you,' Ashton said, and smiled so quickly that the smile had fled almost before it appeared.

You're not so green as you look, thought Jessie. At least you know the school crawler when you see him. Ashton turned to Turnbull who was talking to two other teachers and said, 'Mr. Turnbull—it seems we freed the prisoners before they could put the piano back. I wonder if I might ask for your assistance?'

Turnbull said at once, 'Of course,' and then to the others. 'Only too glad to help. Aren't we?'

Reluctantly the other two joined Turnbull in trundling back the piano on its stumpy metal wheels. Ashton watched them go and said, 'What an obliging chap Mr. Turnbull is.'

Jessie Seaton thought no . . . not green at all, but you've got a trick of turning commands into requests and that's a habit I find very pleasant.

'Shall we go?' said Ashton, and they set off across the deserted playground. As they reached the gates Jessie found that she was still carrying the Union Jack. Perhaps Mr. Ashton's influence was greater than she had believed.

*

That day Mary had got up and dressed. She still looked ill, but she was stronger than she had been, and to be up and about was a pleasure to her. That day and for days to come she was determined to look after Tom, to make a home for him, the kind of home a man like her Tom deserved. She poured out mugs of tea for Tom and his father and listened as they talked. For weeks before the only topic had been the strike, and now it was the settlement.

'Go back down?' said Tom.

Bill Seaton said patiently, 'What else could we do, son?'

'Nowt,' said Tom, 'and the bosses know it. They've got us, da —got us like that.'

He held up his two hands with the fingers interlocked, pushed them together in a vice-like squeeze.

'And every time they want more of our blood,' he said, 'all they have to do is squeeze a bit harder.'

Bill Seaton said, 'But you'll go back down?'

'If the men'll let me,' said Tom.

Mary Seaton interrupted: it was men's business but she couldn't help it.

'But why shouldn't they –' she began.

'I was a scab, love, remember? Who'd want to work with me?'

'I've had a word at the Lodge about that,' said Bill. 'Everybody knows you only scabbed because of Mary. You'll be all right.'

'Oh, thank God,' said Mary.

Bill Seaton looked at his son. 'You don't look any too happy about it,' he said.

'I'm not,' said Tom. 'Going back down for starvation wages isn't my idea of a happy ending.'

Bill Seaton said patiently, 'I know ... it isn't happy, Tom. But maybe it isn't the end either.'

Tom said sardonically, 'Oh no, da. Not another strike. We've just finished losing this one.'

Bill Seaton rose. 'Things'll get better,' he said determinedly. 'You'll see ... I'd better be getting back to your mother.' He turned and awkwardly stroked Mary's hair. 'Ee hinny,' he said, 'it's grand to see you up and about again. You do look better.'

'And I feel better,' she said.

'Well thank God there's some happy endings,' said Bill and turned to Tom, but this time his son rejected the challenge ...

'See you on Monday,' said Bill. 'You and me's on the foreshift. See you're there.'

'I'll be there, da,' said Tom, his voice weary.

'And mind you're on time,' said Bill, and left them.

She waited until she heard the back door close and asked, 'You're really going back to the pit?'

'Well of course I am,' he said.

'But I thought—' she began, then hesitated. There were some words she couldn't say, even to Tom.

'You thought I'd gone back to thieving, is that it?' said Tom.

She looked at him nervously. 'Yes, Tom,' she said. 'I did'

'And now you think I won't.'

'But if you're going back to the pit—' said Mary.

He said angrily, 'You know the money the bosses are offering. That wouldn't keep you in milk and eggs—never mind the doctor's bills. And the bairn needs clothes—so do you.'

Timidly she put out her hand and touched his.

'I wish you wouldn't, Tom,' she said. 'It's wrong.'

'Aye,' said Tom. 'I used to think that an'all. And me da still does But I listened to our Jessie—and our Billy ... Now look—the bosses have robbed us since we first started work. Right?'

Mary said: 'Yes, but—'

'Well I only steal from the bosses, Mary,' said Tom, 'and that isn't stealing at all. It's just taking back what's mine.'

'Is that what Jessie says?' Mary asked.

'Well she used longer words,' said Tom, but his wife interrupted.

'I know our Jessie wouldn't steal,' she said.

'When Jack set us on pinching sheep, she said she was proud of him,' said Tom. 'I want you to be proud of me.'

She said simply: 'I love you, Tom. Whatever you do. You know that.'

His arms tightened round her 'Aye, I do,' he said. 'And if I didn't love you—do you think I'd be risking prison?'

'Couldn't we just go away?' she asked.

'We will,' he said. 'When I've got the money. And in the meantime I'll sweat my guts out alongside me da' .. you know why, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' she said.

'Because if I didn't,' said Tom, 'folks would start asking where I got the money to pay doctors.'

He looked down at her and smiled.

'Da's right, love,' he said. 'There are some happy endings—but you've got to fight for them.'

From upstairs there came the cry of a wakening child.

'The bairn,' said Mary.

Instinctively Tom moved away. 'I'll go and get him,' he said. But Mary grabbed his arm to hold him back; it was a gesture at once clumsy and filled with love.

'No, Tom,' she said. 'Let me. I can now, you know.'

He hesitated. 'If you're sure,' he said.

'It'll be a pleasure for me,' she said and moved towards the door. From upstairs the crying ceased. Swiftly Tom crossed to her and took her once more in his arms.

'He's a good bairn all right,' Tom said. 'A proper cupid an'all.'

*

Bella Seaton was at the sink peeling potatoes and Bill was taking off his boots, changing them for slippers. No sense in wearing himself out: he'd be going back to work soon and the first days back down were always tiring, and at his age the adjustment could be brutal. Carefully he eased himself back into the chair.

'I passed our Jessie at the end of the road,' he said. 'She was talking to a posh feller.'

The peeling came off the potatoes in a steady spiral, tissue paper thin.

'Who was it?' Bella asked.

'He didn't say,' said Bill.

'But surely—' Bella began.

'Because I didn't ask,' Bill Seaton said. 'Blue suit and bowler hat. Looked as if he'd never done a proper day's work in his life.'

Carefully he got to his feet and went over to the table where Bella was working. On the table beside the potatoes in a bowl of water, there was some scraggy meat, some onions and a few carrots.

'For God's sake, Bella—' said Bill, 'not stew again.'

'Just give us the money and I'll slip out and buy a few lobsters,' said Bella, 'and pop into the off-licence for champagne an'all.'

'I'm sick of stew,' said Bill.

'You don't have to eat it,' Bella said.

Bill brightened. 'Oh don't I?' he said.

'Of course not,' said Bella. 'It's just that if you don't you'll starve.'

As she spoke Jessie's step sounded in the yard outside and she came in, looked at her parents. She was still holding the Union Jack. One look at her father's face, and then her mother's face, told her that she'd arrived in time for a disagreement.

'What's up with you two?' she asked.

'Your father doesn't like the menu,' her mother said.

'You shouldn't be fighting today,' said Jessie.

'Why not?' said Bella. 'We've been married long enough. What's so special about today?'

'Mam,' said Jessie, 'the strike's over. We won.' She looked at her father; there was no sign of triumph in his face.

'Well, didn't we?' she asked.

'Yes and no, Jessie,' said Bill. 'Yes and no.'

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'The strike's over right enough,' said Bill, 'but—'

'You didn't give in?' his daughter asked.

'There was nothing else we could do,' he said, and looked at the scraggy meat on the table. 'It was either that or starve.'

Angrily Jessie threw the Union Jack on the sideboard. 'The swine,' she said, 'the rotten swine.'

Bella called out in rebuke, 'Jessie!'

'You watch your tongue, girl,' her father said. 'I'm one of them, remember.'

She said at once, 'Oh not you, dad. Surely you didn't think I meant you? I'm talking about the bosses. They'd squeeze you dry before they'd give you a penny.'

'Our Tom was saying the same thing,' said Bill.

'And he was right,' said Jessie. 'All those weeks we've suffered and scraped and starved—and all for nothing.'

She looked so forlorn that her father moved instinctively to comfort her. This had been her fight every bit as much as it had been his.

'Our turn'll come,' he said.

'If I didn't believe that, dad,' she said, 'I'd go and jump off the pier.' Angrily she dabbed at her eyes. 'Is Tom going back?'

'Aye.'

'There won't be any trouble about him scabbing?' she asked.

'Tom'll work with me,' Bill said. 'He'll be all right.'

Bella began transferring the ingredients of the stew to a soot-blackened pan, the inside of which was burnished until it shone.

'Seeing Jack tonight?' she asked.

'No,' said Jessie.

The flat monosyllable augured no good; and Bella knew it. She lifted the pan on to the hob of the fire where the heat of the coal could reach it evenly.

'Oh Jessie,' she said. 'What's up now?'

'Nothing,' Jessie said wearily. 'That new boss of his has sent for him, that's all—Sir Horatio Manners.'

'You don't like him?' Bella asked And when her daughter gave no answer, said, 'But you've never met the man.'

'I just don't like bosses, mam,' said Jessie.

'Jack'll be one himself before he's finished,' Bella said.

'And I don't like that either,' said Jessie.

'Now, Jessie—' Bella began, but her daughter was in no mood to be pacified.

'Jack ought to be on *our* side,' she said.

Bill Seaton said, 'Jack's only on one side, hinny. His own. It's the way he's made and I can't say I blame him.'

He took out his pipe and Jessie bent to light a paper spill from the fire and carried it to her father.

'Can't you?' she asked, and he puffed at his pipe. 'Well I can. Take a look round you—this house—this street—the whole scruffy, jerry-built town. There's precious few could put it right, but Jack's one of them . . . and what's he going to do instead? Go jaunting off to London to make his fortune. You'd think he was Dick Whittington.'

Bella said, 'Aye but it's not a cat he's taking with him. It's you.'

Bill Seaton said comfortingly, 'You'd better start learning to take the world as you find it, lass. Once we've left school we've finished with minding the teacher.'

'I know,' said Jessie. 'Of course I know. But all the same—'

Bella Seaton said, 'Things'll change, love. Once you get to London and start setting up your own house it'll be all different. You'll see.'

'Just imagine,' her daughter said savagely, 'Jessie Seaton among the toffs, handing round the scones and china tea.'

'That reminds me,' said Bill, 'who's the toff *you* were talking to when I came in?'

His daughter looked puzzled. 'Toff?' she said. 'Oh, Mr Ashton. He isn't a toff, dad—he's my headmaster.'

Bill Seaton said obstinately, a Gallowshield man clinging to a Gallowshield theory, 'He looked like a toff to me.'

Jessie thought about it. 'Well maybe he is,' she said. 'In a way.'

Bella Seaton turned swiftly to face her. 'Walking you home, was he?'

'Well –yes,' said Jessie. 'I suppose he was.'

'Not a married man, I hope?' said Bella.

'Not any more,' said Jessie.

'Jessie!' her mother said. 'He's never divorced and teaching bairns?'

Jessie said patiently, 'He's a widower, mam.'

'I dare say,' said Bella. 'All the same he shouldn't be walking you home—not when you're walking out with Jack.'

'He's done a bit more than that,' said Jessie. 'He's asked me out to dinner.'

'Well!' said Bella, 'of all the nerve!'

'Steady on a minute, mother,' said Bill. 'Jessie can't get into much trouble between twelve o'clock and a quarter to two.'

'No, dad,' Jessie said. 'I mean proper dinner—in a restaurant, in the evening.'

Bella Seaton said swiftly, 'You're not going.'

'After all, mam,' said Jessie, 'he's not to know I'm going out with Jack—or anybody else. He's entitled to ask me out if he wants to—or at least he thinks he is.'

'You didn't tell him about Jack?' said Bella.

Her daughter looked away. 'No,' she said. 'I didn't.'

'You mean you like this Ashton feller?' her mother asked.

'He's all right,' Jessie said, 'if only he wouldn't go on about our glorious Empire all the time.'

As she spoke, she picked up the Union Jack from the sideboard, raised it on high and saluted it, then put it back.

'To hear him talk,' she said, 'you'd think we all had shares in it—and the only reason folk go picking slag heaps for coal is by way of a hobby.' She shook her head and smiled, but the smile was gentle. 'Daft as a brush,' she said. 'Still, he's a kind enough chap.'

Bill Seaton said, 'He's a chap that's asked you out and I don't think you should go.'

'Dad,' said Jessie, 'he's an old man.'

Bill Seaton said at once, 'That he's not. He looked five years younger than me and I'm not old.'

'Well anyway,' said Jessie, 'he's asked me out to dinner and

I'm going. I've never been asked out to dinner before. It'll be practice for when I'm married to Jack.'

■

Jack Ford was getting in some practice himself, in the elegant drawing room in Corbridge that Sir Horatio Manners used as if it were his own. It was nice to see him handling things, Ford thought, pretty to watch. Whether it was using this house as a base for his hunt for swords, or sending his hosts off to play bridge because he wanted solitude, or commandeering the drawing room to hold a business meeting, whatever it was he did it with style and always got away with it. He had the money, you see; the money to make other folk -even rich folk—do what he wanted; because when you had the money you had the power.

Manners lay back at ease in his armchair and listened to Ford talk. The ideas were tumbling out of the younger man, one chasing another so fast that it was difficult to keep up with them. And good ideas too. Manners believed in his impulses and his impulse had never been more right than this time; this would be a useful man to have, a very useful man. His only problem would be to prevent the younger man from taking over, but he was an older fox and knew a few more tricks than Ford. He would chance it.

At last he said aloud, 'My son was right about you. You have got brains.'

'You're very kind, sir,' said Ford.

'We both know that's not true,' Sir Horatio said. 'I'm employing you because you've got the kind of brains I could use and for no other reason. Get that absolutely clear, Ford.'

'Very good, sir,' said Ford.

'Get us both a drink, will you,' Sir Horatio asked, and watched as Ford rose and handled decanters and glasses. The younger man had always moved neatly, but in the short time since Manners had known him he appeared to have learned to move with elegance too, so that when he brought a glass of

sherry over to Manners it was with the deference not of a servant, but of a younger man to an older one, a younger man who had a sense of style. Manners liked that, but the liking had to be curbed if they were to work together. Gifted employee or not Ford would always be a man you had to watch.

'The fact that you were with my son when he died,' Manners said aloud, 'has nothing to do with your being here tonight—although at one time you rather hoped it had.'

'I'd sooner have it this way, sir,' said Ford.

'Would you indeed? Why?' Manners asked.

Ford sipped at his whisky, savouring it. 'Because you don't like sentimentality,' he said at last, 'and I don't like charity.'

'But you have no objection to money, I take it?' said Manners.

'Not money I've earned, sir,' said Ford.

'You'll earn it all right,' Sir Horatio said, then switched the subject abruptly, disconcertingly, as he so often did. 'Are you married?'

'Not yet, sir,' said Ford.

'Going to be?'

'If you've no objection,' said Ford.

'Suppose I have?' Sir Horatio asked.

'Then I won't get married,' said Ford.

For once Manners was disconcerted.

'Really, Ford,' he said. 'I know that you young men are supposed to be keen, but—'

'Don't misunderstand me, sir,' Ford said. 'If you don't want me to get married I won't take your job. And that means I won't be able to afford to get married.'

'I see,' said Manners. 'Local girl?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You know, Ford,' said Manners, 'very soon you'll be changing your whole style of life. You want to be very sure . . .'

'I am, sir,' said Ford. 'I love her very much.'

'A beauty, is she?' Manners asked.

'No, sir,' said Ford. 'But she's what I want. I wouldn't find better in London or anywhere else.'

'Somehow I hadn't visualised you as such an ardent lover,' Sir Horatio said, and as he spoke Dolly came in to make up the fire. To Manners it was as if the parlour maid didn't exist, thought Ford, or perhaps more correctly that she was some kind of machine, an automaton that performed functions solely for Manners's comfort and heard not at all. Well I'd better act like that too, he thought.

'I don't think you quite understand,' he said.

Manners chuckled. 'Old men never do,' he said. 'One day a younger man will use exactly the same words to you and you'll feel indignant, as I do. We may not understand, now, Ford, but we must have done in the past, otherwise you wouldn't be here.' Dolly left the room.

■

The dinner was the best to be had in Gallowshield, in the Grill Room of the Station Hotel. Jessie wore the best clothes she owned, but even so she realised that her standard of dress was well below that of every other woman in the room. But she realised too that Ashton had no idea of it, and took comfort from the fact. He himself, in a well-brushed dark suit, glittering collar and cuffs, London University tie, gold watch in his waistcoat pocket, looked very much at home in the restaurant, so much so that it never occurred to him that she needed to be put at her ease, with the result that she felt at ease almost at once. He was a kindly and generous host, and waited patiently as she read through the menu.

That in itself was a revelation: there was so much choice, so many different things to start with, so much fish, so many main courses, so many sweets. The rich, she thought, really knew how to do themselves well. There was enough choice on the printed card handed to her to feed her entire class for a day. Ashton must be aware of this, as she was. Yet the thought did not occur to him. She ought, she knew, to dislike

him for that—Billy would have detested it—but there was an innate kindliness in the man to which she could not help but respond.

'Let me get you a glass of sherry while you choose,' he said, and signalled to the wine waiter. It was not the easy gesture that Jack Ford would have made, but a prim little signal that nevertheless brought a quick response, and Jessie found herself sipping at sherry that tasted infinitely better than the stuff her mother had once ladled into her when she decided that they both needed building up after influenza ... She decided on soup at last, and lamb chops served with green peas. The sweets bewildered her and to play it safe she ordered ice cream. There was so much to learn, she thought, and looked about her. The Grill Room hadn't changed since the hotel was built, late in the Victorian era. Red plush and polished brasswork everywhere: plush for curtains, banquettes and chairs, and brass pots for palm trees, brass trays for drinks, brass buckets for ice that it seemed was necessary if you ordered white wine. But Ashton had chosen a Burgundy for her. It was the first wine she had ever drunk that was neither sherry nor port, and she found it delicious. Course by course they went through the menu, Jessie always hesitating, so that she could learn from Ashton how knives, spoons and forks should be handled. You didn't, it seemed, tip your soup plate towards you when you took soup, you tipped it away from you. She thought of Jack Ford and wondered if he knew this small but apparently vital piece of information. But of course he would. Jack was going to get on: he would know everything necessary for that. 'It really is extremely kind of you to join me like this,' Ashton said. This meal was going to set him back a pound at least, perhaps more like two, and here he was thanking *her* for *her* kindness, and doing it she knew without irony.

'I'm enjoying it very much,' Jessie said, and that was true. She was learning, but learning was no hardship to her even in her college days. She thought if she'd gone away to college

maybe she too might by now have acquired Ashton's instinctive table manners, but her parents' money and her scholarship had never stretched to that. She travelled by day and returned home with a pile of work by night. No going away to college for her. Maybe her father wouldn't have allowed it anyway. For Bill, his daughter's place was under his own roof, and nowhere else. Not at night.

'Do you know, Miss Seaton, you seemed surprised, when you said you were enjoying it,' Ashton said.

'I suppose I am, really,' she said and laughed aloud. Then—'Oh I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I've never been in a place like this before.'

'You were born here?' Ashton asked.

'Yes,' Jessie said, 'but not in the Station Hotel.' A thought struck her. 'Do you know,' she said, 'I've never been out of this town for one single night.'

'I think that's sad,' Ashton said, then added hastily, 'not that Gallowshield hasn't got its redeeming features.'

'It's a dump,' said Jessie. 'Pit heads and shipyards and slag heaps. Just a dump.' She put down her soup spoon and the waitress in a cap and apron starched glittering white cleared away the first course.

'Where were you born, Mr. Ashton?' she asked.

'In a little village in Kent,' Ashton said. 'A lovely little place actually.'

'And you left it to come here?' Jessie asked.

'My wife lived here,' Ashton said. 'I met her when I was stationed here during the war ... She didn't want to leave it, so I settled here.'

'A lot of us are like that,' Jessie said. 'Oh I know we've got miles of beaches and a wonderful sea coast, but most of the time we haven't the money to enjoy them. Sometimes not even the strength. The industry here is what matters, and yet there are jobs in other places. We could go away if we wanted to, but for some daft reason we don't want to. We just don't seem able to leave the place—no matter what misery it brings.

We even hate the ones who do leave it—as if they were traitors ... I'm sorry,' she said, 'I'm talking too much.'

'No, no, please go on,' said Ashton.

'This town deserves nothing from us,' said Jessie, 'and yet we give it everything.'

'You make it sound like being in love with a handsome scoundrel,' said Ashton. She looked sharply at him then, but he was making an analogy, no more than that.

'That's exactly what it's like,' she said at last. 'But the love is there.'

'I have no pretensions to being handsome, Miss Seaton,' Ashton said, 'but I give you my word I'm not a scoundrel ... May I offer you a little more wine, Miss Seaton?'

He reached for the decanter.

19

Carefully Bill Seaton checked his pit boots, and thanked God they didn't need cobbling. They were as strong and as waterproof as the day he'd bought them. On the other side of the fireplace his wife sat, placidly knitting, or at least she looked placid: the even movements of her hands hid a perturbation that Bill knew was the equal of his own. His daughter had gone out to dine with a widower in a restaurant. It was the kind of thing they made jokes about in music-halls, but for Bill Seaton it was no matter for laughter. According to his code, pleasure was never very far away from sin. And yet there was a fairness in his that proved to him that his daughter, a grown woman and an upright one, had every right to accept the invitation, and if she should have been out with Jack Ford instead, then maybe it was Ford's fault for not being there when he was wanted.

Aloud he said, 'It'll be funny getting up early on Monday.'

Bella didn't look up from her knitting. 'Well mind you do,' she said.

No doubt about it thought Bill. She's worried about our Jessie. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I won't miss the first day back. I wish to God I could.'

This time she waited until she reached the end of her row, then let the knitting lie in her lap and looked at him. 'There's nowt wrong with you, is there?' she asked, but her voice was gentle.

'Only me hands, bonny lass,' said Seaton. 'They're that soft I should be wearing gloves.'

'Give them a good soak in vinegar,' said Bella. 'And they'll soon harden up . . .' She resumed her knitting again. 'It'll be funny though,' she said.

'I see nowt funny in having soft hands,' said her husband.

'Not that, you daft'un,' she said. 'I meant it'll be funny not having you under my feet all day.' She smiled at him and as she did so there was a sound of footsteps in the yard outside and the by now familiar call: 'Anybody in?'

Bill Seaton said at once, 'Aye. Ha'way in.'

Bella Seaton whispered, 'Oh my God, Bill. It's Jack.'

Bill Seaton said equally softly, 'What do you expect me to do? Send him away?'

Jack Ford came in. New suit, Bella noticed, and a smart one an'all, and the sort of shirt the toffs wore. No doubt about it, Jack Ford was going up in the world. She rose and rolled up her knitting.

'Jack, lad,' she said. 'It's good to see you.'

'Evening Mrs. Seaton, Mr. Seaton,' said Ford.

Bella pulled a chair up to the fire. 'Come and sit down,' she said. 'Make yourself comfortable,' then fussed around to find the cushion that belonged to the chair.

Jack Ford allowed her to tuck it in at his back, then looked at the pit boots at Bill's feet.

'Getting ready for Monday?' he asked.

'That's right,' said Seaton. 'It's killing, them first days back.'

'Don't I know it,' said Ford.

'You think you do,' Bill Seaton said, 'but just you wait till you're my age.'

'Somebody else was saying that just a couple of hours ago,' said Ford, then: 'Is Jessie around?' There was a moment's silence then Bill and Bella Seaton both rushed into speech together.

'When do you start your new job then?' Bill Seaton asked.

'I thought you had a bit of business tonight, Jack?' said Bella.

Ford answered them one at a time. 'I've got two more weeks

to go before I start properly, Mr. Seaton,' he said and then to Bella: 'I had to see my new boss to get a few more instructions, but we finished early. Is Jess—'

'Fancy a glass of beer?' said Bill. 'I could easily slip down to the pub and bring a jug back.' Carefully he avoided his wife's gaze as he said this; there'd be time enough to be accused of cowardice after Jack had left. He rose but there was no escape.

'No thanks, Mr. Seaton,' said Ford. 'I brought something a bit better than beer.'

From his jacket pocket Jack took a half bottle of whisky and put it on the table.

'By, Jack,' Bella Seaton said, 'your blood's worth bottling ... I'll just slip into the scullery and get the glasses.'

Both she and Bill Seaton knew that the glasses were in the dresser behind her, but Bill had tried his escape route. It was time for hers. She went into the scullery and Jack Ford said, 'Where's Jessie, Mr. Seaton?'

He asked the question pleasantly enough, but it was one that had to be answered.

Bill Seaton said desperately, 'She went out.'

'Oh aye?' said Ford. 'Did she say where?'

'Not to me she didn't,' said Bill, then got to his feet, fetched three glasses from the dresser, and called out to Bella, 'The glasses is here.'

Reluctantly Bella came back in as Jack began to pour out the whisky.

'I'll forget my own name in a minute,' Bella said, but it was Bill's turn for revenge.

'Did Jessie say anything to you about where she was going, mother?' Bill Seaton asked.

Unseen by Jack she gave her husband a very dirty look indeed. This was absolute betrayal.

'Let's see now,' she floundered. 'Didn't she say she had to go and see the headmaster? Yes, that was it—a bit of business to do with the school.' She sat down with the air of one who

has acquitted herself well and Ford handed her a glass of whisky.

'Ta, me bairn,' she said. Jack Ford handed over a second glass to Bill Seaton, who thanked him, and took the third glass for himself.

'Funny time of night to go and see her headmaster,' he said.

Bella sought courage from her glass and said at last, 'Oh they have all sorts of meetings and conferences and that.'

'She never mentioned it to me,' said Jack, but Bella continued in full flood. 'Reports and registers and who's going to be monitor. They're always at it.'

'Well it won't be for long,' said Ford. 'Once she gets to London she'll never work again.'

Bella said, 'I'm going to drink to them beautiful words,' and lifted her glass 'Here's to you, Jack. Jessie's a very lucky girl.'

'I reckon it's me that's the lucky one,' said Ford.

Bill Seaton said, 'You've done well, lad.'

'And I'm going to do better,' said Ford.

'I reckon you are,' Bill Seaton said. 'I never saw anybody like you for getting on.'

Bella said impatiently, 'Well don't make it sound like it was a crime.'

'It's not that, Bella,' said Bill. 'It's just—having a boss for a son-in-law. By lad, it'll take a bit of getting used to.'

Jack Ford said without bitterness, 'Well at least I'll be out of your way, Mr. Seaton.'

'Aye,' said Bill, and suddenly he grinned. 'And vice-versa as you might say.'

Bella Seaton said, 'And what might that be when it's at home?'

Jack Ford said, 'It meant we understand each other, Mrs. Seaton.'

'Aye, lad,' said Seaton. 'I think we do.'

Ford poured out another round of whisky. 'Ta,' said Bill.

'There'll be a lot of folks will miss you round here. I never met a chap with so many mates. Oh that reminds me. I saw Matt Headley on the way back from the branch meeting He said he wanted to see you.'

'Oh aye?'

'Urgent he said it was,' said Bill.

'Urgent need of a drink more likely,' said Bella. She put down her empty glass and Jack refilled it. 'Thanks, lad,' she said and drank and added reproachfully, 'You're far too open-handed, Jack.'

'What Bella means is that you should keep it in the family,' said Bill.

'What Bella means,' said Bella, 'is I'm going to miss you, lad . . . Ee I wonder what's keeping our Jessie?'

•

They had arrived at coffee. Ashton had offered a brandy or liqueur to Jessie but she had declined. He himself was sipping a cognac with every appearance of enjoyment, and somehow this had disappointed Jessie, perhaps even gave her a feeling of pique, as if he should only drink when she drank also. But this was daft. She was nothing to this man, or him to her . . . Except that he had invited her out to dinner. Now why would he have done that unless he wanted to? Unless he wanted to very much? It was time to end all this. Even if he didn't know it; she was Jack's girl.

'I really ought to be going,' she said.

'Oh please, said Ashton. 'It's only just nine o'clock and I'm enjoying myself so much.'

There was really no answer to that: it was impossible to refuse so generous, so kindly a man.

'Would you mind if I smoke a cigarette?' he asked.

'Of course not,' she said.

'Thank you,' said Ashton and produced a cigarette case, selected a cigarette. And without being told she knew at once that the case had been a present from his wife. He looked

at her, the case still open, and said, 'You don't, I take it? Smoke, I mean?'

'No,' said Jessie. It was hard but not impossible to imagine dad's reactions if she were to light up a fag.

Ashton looked pleased by the refusal.

'I didn't think you would,' he said. 'I don't smoke all that much myself, but there are times when I find that it relieves nervous tension. Please don't misunderstand me. I really am enjoying myself, you know, but usually I'm a rather lonely person, and to talk at length is something of an ordeal for me. I find a cigarette of great assistance at times like this. One can become—very isolated in Gallowshield. As you yourself implied, you're a very clannish lot, you Geordies. I don't think you really approve of foreigners. Up here one gets the impression that only Northerners are acceptable, and the Midlands begin at Yorkshire, so what chance has a poor devil from Kent got?'

He looked at his cigarette, then tapped at it in the gleaming brass ashtray.

'That question wasn't really rhetorical, Miss Seaton,' he said.

For some reason the only thing she could think of to say was the worst cliché of the lot: 'Mr. Ashton, this is so sudden.' But that's the way it had been—taking her completely by surprise. She looked across at him—the hand that held the cigarette was trembling. It was taking all the courage he possessed to continue with this conversation. The least she could do was to reply in language that was firm yet friendly, but never a cliché. 'Mr. Ashton,' Jessie began, 'I think you should know...'

But he interrupted her. His courage, it seemed, could only survive for a limited amount of time.

'Please,' Ashton said. 'Let me finish ... I came to live here for my wife's sake. Once she died I had only just got my headmastership and that obliged me to remain here—at least for some little time. But that time is up now. I could—if I so wished—move on.'

'And will you?' Jessie asked.

Suddenly Ashton's hand was completely steady He had reached a point from which there was no turning back, and it seemed to her that he welcomed having reached it.

'That's rather up to you,' said Ashton.

And this time, she knew, he was not going to be fobbed off with thanks for a lovely meal. She owed him the truth and he deserved it, but somehow the truth was very difficult to tell.

'Mr. Ashton,' she began, 'I really don't think—'

'Oh please,' he said. 'I'm not a particularly brave man, you know. My courage won't last for ever. Let me continue.'

'Very well,' said Jessie, 'but—'

'Thank you,' said Ashton, and took a deep breath. 'Miss Seaton,' he said, 'I see from the school's records that you are twenty-five years old. I'm forty-three—but I have never had a day's illness in my life. I hold a Second Class Honours Degree in history from the University of London, and my current salary is £370 per annum. This I can offer you—together with respect, admiration and if I may say so—devotion. Miss Seaton, will you marry me?'

■

Bella dozed by the fire. Jack and his whisky had both long since disappeared, and Bill had gone to his bed, building up strength for the ordeal of work awaiting him. Bella too was tired, too tired to do any more knitting, but it was impossible for her to sleep until she knew that Jessie was home, impossible for her to sleep, come to that, until she knew why Jessie had found it possible to spend so much time with that Ashton feller—a man nearly old enough to be her father—when she had Jack. There was the sound of footsteps crossing the yard, but Bella still slept, and woke up only when Jessie opened the back door and let a draught of cool air into the house. She woke then, and huddled into her shawl, folding it

more tightly round her, looking with regret at the dying fire, then turning to her daughter.

'And what time is this to come home, may I ask?' said Bella.

Jessie looked at the clock on the kitchen mantelpiece. Patiently she said, 'It's half past ten, mam. It's only half past ten.'

'You've been alone with that feller for three and a half hours,' her mother said.

Still fighting for patience, Jessie said, 'Not exactly alone, mam. The restaurant was full of people.'

'Don't you try to tell me it took all that time to eat a meal,' said Bella.

'Well it did,' said Jessie.

'I don't believe it,' her mother said.

Jessie shrugged. 'Suit yourself,' she said, 'but there was four courses, and coffee after—and sherry before.'

Bella Seaton said, 'Sherry! Have you been drinking?'

Jessie looked at the half bottle of whisky, now empty, on the table where Jack Ford had left it.

'No more than you by the looks of it,' she said.

'Jack was here,' Bella said. 'He brought it for your father. I had a drop with them just to be sociable.'

'Jack was here?' said Jessie. 'But He said he had to see his boss tonight.'

'He did see him,' said Bella, 'but the meeting finished early, so he came to see his lass an'all—only she wasn't in.'

'Did you tell him where I was?' Jessie asked.

Bella said, 'I said it was school business.'

'Did he believe you?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Bella Seaton. 'He's a sharp one, Jack . . .'

She looked at her daughter, obviously shaken by the fact she had missed Jack, and yet with a secret too, a secret that pleased her. 'Jessie,' she said, 'what on earth did you go and do it for? And coming back home at this time of night. Jack

waited and waited till he nearly missed his last tram.'

'I went,' Jessie said carefully, 'because I was asked.'

'And don't start coming the sarcastic,' her mother said. 'Not with your own mother. If you'd been a few years younger it would be your da who'd be waiting up for you—and with his belt handy.'

Jessie said, 'I'm not trying to be sarcastic, mam, honestly. I went because Mr. Ashton asked me—politely. He made it sound important to him ... That hasn't happened to me for a long time.'

'You mean Jack treats you badly?' her mother asked, obviously prepared to deny it with her last breath.

'Of course not,' Jessie said impatiently. 'He's very kind. But he doesn't think I'm that important.'

'Oh doesn't he?' said Bella.

'He never takes any notice of a word I say,' said Jessie.

'And do you take notice of the words he says?' Bella asked. 'Get it into your head, Jessie Jack's going to be boss because he's the one that earns the wages.'

'And what do I do?' said Jessie. 'Sit on his knee and say yes, dear, you're right, dear—while all the time I know he's wrong?'

Bella said inexorably, 'It's either that or do without him.'

'Do without Jack?' said Jessie, and Bella could have cried for her not quite pretty daughter. Her voice held only amazement and horror. Do without Jack was a proposition so fantastic that it could not be possible, yet at the same time it sounded like something that might begin tomorrow.

'Aye,' said Bella—'that's where the shoe pinches, isn't it? Make up your mind, Jessie Seaton. Do you want him or don't you?'

Jessie said impatiently, as one stating an obvious fact, 'Of course I want him. I'll always want him.'

'Then stay away from this Ashton feller,' said Bella.

Jessie turned away: so much had happened that was impossible to explain, perhaps even to comprehend.

'I will, mam,' she said. 'I will. It's just that—' She turned to

face her mother—'He asked me to marry him.'

'He never!' her mother said.

Still facing her mother, Jessie nodded, smiling. There could be no misunderstanding the meaning of that smile.

'Well!' her mother said. 'The impident -' She struggled for words.

Jessie said, 'It's supposed to be a compliment, mam. And I think it was.'

'You're not trying to tell me that you'd sooner have him than Jack?' her mother asked.

'Of course not,' Jessie said. 'It's just oh he's funny and pompous and his politics are awful—'

Bella said, 'What in the world's politics got to do with it?'

'He's a lot nicer than I thought,' her daughter said.

Her mother looked appalled, and Jessie hastened to reassure her. 'You needn't look at me like that, mam,' she said. 'I told him no.'

But there was one question still to be asked, a question more important even than Jessie's refusal.

'Did you tell him about Jack?' her mother asked.

Jessie finally admitted defeat. Wearily she said, 'No, mam, I didn't. He'll find out soon enough.'

*

It was Sunday. Day of rest, Matt Headley thought, and day of noise an'all. In the distance he could hear the bells of St. Philip's summoning the faithful to attend Holy Communion, and much nearer to home there was the brass of the Salvation Army summoning all who cared to listen to stand up and cry Hallelujah. Bells and brass band played in violently antipathetic keys; the noise they gave up between them was excruciating. And then to add to the din there was the sound of the knocker on the front door that banged out a rhythm that ran counter to both band and bells Matt Headley remembered a line he had heard on church parade:

'Praise God from whom all blessings flow –' he thought to

himself, and went to answer the door. It was Jack Ford.

'Oh it's you,' Matt Headley said. 'You took your time.'

'Got here as soon as I could, kidder,' said Ford.

Headley looked at him. That suit was never bought in Gallowshield, and even the shirt must have cost a mint.

'You'd better come in,' said Headley. 'We'll go in the front.'

He stood aside and Ford moved down the tiny passage and into the front room where first he had slept with Dolly. It was still aged, still needed money spent on its furnishings, and it was nipping clean. He went inside and Matt Headley followed, closing the door behind him. There was a draught curtain on the front room door and Matt Headley pulled it across to deaden the sound of their voices. In the background church bells and brass band still waged their holy war.

'What's the matter?' said Ford. 'Do you think I'm getting too posh for the kitchen? Is that it?'

Matt said, 'Me mam's in there getting the dinner ready. I don't want her to hear what I've got to say.'

Ford shrugged, then sat down, waiting. That this was some kind of crisis was obvious, but only Matt knew what the crisis was: it was much better to wait. The trouble was it always took Matt so long to get around to what he really had to say. Better to help him, to find out if the crisis were the usual one.

'Starting work tomorrow?' Ford asked.

'The foreshift,' Matt Headley said. 'Now listen, Jack.'

It was probably money after all. Matt's crises were usually money—or the lack of it. Ford took out his wallet.

'I can let you have a couple till pay day,' he said. 'Three if you're pushed.'

'Money!' said Matt. 'Is that all you can think about?'

'We've been mates a long time now,' said Ford. 'And we've always helped each other. And it's usually been money we help each other with.'

'Like hell we've helped each other,' said Matt.

Ford put his wallet away; already he knew what was coming.

'All right,' he said. 'Get on with it.'

'You and your big talk,' Matt Headley said. 'You and your bloody fairy godfather. But it was you that was waving his magic wand over my sister.'

'Oh!' said Ford. 'So that's it.'

'Aye,' said Matt. 'That's it. She's knocked up—and you did it.'

'Did she tell you?' Ford asked.

'She came home on her day off,' Matt Headley said. 'Thank God mam and da were out. She wanted money. A lot of money—but she didn't want to tell me why. Only I made her tell me. She wanted to get rid of the bairn.'

Ford was on his feet at once. 'What?'

Matt Headley was sarcastic. 'Oh,' he said. 'Surprised, are we? I suppose you're going to tell me you didn't know.'

'Of course I didn't know,' said Ford.

'You're a liar,' Matt Headley said. 'The pair of you's been at it for weeks.'

Ford said impatiently, 'I'm not denying that, but an abortion. Why, man?'

'Because you're daft on that schoolteacher,' Matt Headley said, 'and Dolly thinks you won't have her. Well, daft or not you're bloody going to have her—or I'll hammer the hell out of you.' He moved forward. Suddenly bells and brass band alike were silent.

Jack Ford said calmly, 'You think you're up to it, Matt?'

Matt Headley hesitated. It was incredible, it was almost impossible that he could strike his old sergeant, and even if he did find the strength to do so he knew exactly what was in it for him—a bloody good hiding Well even so, Dolly was his sister, and he owed her the love and loyalty of her sole surviving brother. Before he could take action Jack Ford moved across to the sofa where he had first made love to Matt Headley's sister.

'You'd better listen to me a minute, Matt,' he said. 'Dolly and me have had an agreement from the very start She's a grown woman and it's got nothing to do with you—but I'll tell

you anyway. I told her that if she got pregnant I'd marry her—and I meant it, Matt. I mean it now.'

'And what about your other girl?' Matt Headley asked.

Jack Ford was silent, absorbing a pain that had to be endured. 'I haven't got one,' he said at last, 'not any more ... and I'm going to have to tell her so, God help me.'

■

That evening Tom Seaton too was checking his boots, making sure nothing needed doing to them, while at the kitchen table his wife cut sandwiches, brewed tea in the pot, waiting for it to cool so that she could fill his can to take with him the next morning. Above them, on the kitchen mantelpiece, the American alarm clock ticked noisily away, knocking off the hours and minutes that were to go before it was time for Tom to join his father and go off to the pit. Like his father too, Tom Seaton examined his hands, thought how soft they were, how easily they would blister when once again he started using his putter's shovel. But there was no help for it, next morning he had to go down on the foreshift, putt the coal his da hewed, and that was that. Mary looked at him as he put his pit boots down, yawned and stretched.

'I wish you'd promise you wouldn't,' she said at last

'Wouldn't what?' said Tom.

'You know,' she said.

'I might have known you didn't mean go back to work,' Tom Seaton said.

'But that's just it,' said his wife. 'I mean you have got your job back.'

'I've told you already,' said Tom. 'This job pays nowt but washers I can do better than that for you.'

She turned to face him, and he could see the fear in her eyes.

'Don't worry, bonny lass,' he said. 'I'll be too worn out to do any thieving for the next few weeks.' He looked at the clock, still ticking dementedly on the dresser; time, the oldest enemy.

'It's late,' he said and stood up. 'If I'm not on time for me father in the morning he'll give us hell.' He went over to his wife, put his arm around her waist and drew her gently to the door that led to the stairs. 'Ha-way to bed,' he said.

20

It was early morning, and even though it was late May the streets were bleak, the men shivered as one by one they left the shelter of their houses and moved down the back lanes and on to the streets that led inexorably to St Oswin's colliery. Some of them joined mates and walked together in pairs or groups, but there was little conversation. It was after victory that men talked, after defeat there was nothing to say. Bill Seaton walked along to Tom's house and when he reached it Tom was already waiting by the door. He fell into step beside his father. Each man grunted a greeting as they met, but there was no conversation, only memory of the defeat. Together they walked to the pityard gates, and made their way at last to the pit cage and underwent the ritual search for matches, a search that each of them had undergone hundreds and hundreds of times, then clambered into the cage, crouched on its floor. The first day back was always a bad one, not just because of soft hands and muscles which had forgotten the work they were about to be called upon to do; the first day back was the one when you worried too, worried about whether the maintenance men had done their work properly or not, worried about whether rock would fall or gas explode. Glum and shivering they sat in the cage, then suddenly the winding engine came into life, the rising sun disappeared, and they were back in hot darkness.

They made their way to the seam along a tunnel that grew narrower and narrower until at last, crawling, they reached their place of work. Three foot six and not bad at that. It meant you could work kneeling, not lying on your side to hew like

some unlucky buggers who had drawn the real narrow seams. Not too much damp neither, and what water there was would soon be cleared away by the boy whose job it was to scoop it up and get rid of it. And at least thank God it wasn't cold, not down there. Already father and son could feel sweat beginning to ooze, running in rivulets down the coal dust that already stained their bodies. 'Well,' said Bill Seaton at last, 'we'd best get at it.'

He knelt in front of the seam, his pick ready. Behind him his son stood by with the short-handled putter's shovel, ready to load coal on to a waiting trolley. Suddenly an overman appeared—a colliery foreman. Bill looked at the rock above him, checked the pit props that held the roof in place.

'Is everything all right, Mr. Warburton?' he asked.

'It's all been checked,' the foreman said. 'Just you get on with it. When it's time for your wages I'll tell you.'

Bill Seaton swung his pick.

*

That was at six in the morning. At five to nine the children lined up in the playground at school, and Mr. Turnbull blew his whistle and bellowed at them. On the second whistle the children, not quite so promptly, formed them up class by class, and marched in. The second whistle was to write down the names of those who were late. Mr. Turnbull would check his own register, which he used on the afternoon, and those who had got there on time would be marked present. Jesse crept up the classroom, and sat down, and drew a deep breath, and began to say his name over and over all the way to...

...and a short address from Mr. ... and a prayer, and many marked ... and prayed, and prayed ... Jesse

'Here, miss.' 'Roger Atkinson.' 'Here, miss.' 'Walter Chandler.' 'Here, miss . . .'

Down the pit they'd stopped for a sip of cold tea to ease the sweat just a little, the sweat which was now freely flowing. Each man could expect to lose two or three pounds of weight at least by the time the shift was over. They emptied the dregs from the tops of their tea cans on to the floor and Bill turned back to the stall where he hewed and again spoke the ritual, 'Well let's get at it.' Kneeling, he began to swing the short-handled pick and behind him Tom went into action, shovelling coal into a waiting trolley, and then pushed it away. Already both men's muscles ached and their hands were raw, but to admit it would be to accept yet another defeat, and so they worked in stolid silence, taking some comfort from the fact that three hours were now up and there were only five to go. Bill continued to swing his pick, wincing as the palms of his hands reacted against each impact, making a conscious effort not to swear as each blow was struck. Behind him he could hear the clatter of the trolley as Tom pushed it away down the shaft. Behind him too, but unseen, a pit prop was slipping, moving further and further from the vertical with each impact of the pick. Suddenly its chock fell and the pit prop slipped to the ground. Immediately there was a roar of tumbling rock, a roar like gunfire, and Bill was inundated in a solid sea of falling stone. Behind him Tom abandoned the trolley and crawled frantically back up the shaft towards the stall, but where there had been a solid seam of coal that gleamed like oil there was now only a shapeless mass of rock, smaller stones still pattering down on him.

'Da!' Tom Seaton called, still crawling. 'Da!' But there was no answer, only the patter of falling stones.

•

In Jessie's classroom the clock said ten past nine and the children had embarked on their first lesson of the day: multiplication tables which they recited in a kind of rhythmic

chant, standing up, hands behind their backs, with Jessie conducting them as if they were a massed choir.

'Seven fives are 35
Seven sixes are 42
Seven sevens are 49'

and then as they reached 'seven eights are 56' there came the rising scream of a siren from the pithead. At once the chanting died. Jessie went to her classroom window, from which she could see the pithead and a group of women, shawls round their heads, running to learn whose turn it was for disaster . . .

Down by, Tom had already begun to pull and heave at the falling stone before other miners joined him. With them was Matt Headley, who had left his maintenance work to lend a hand. They worked in silence—accidents were so common and so predictable in their courses that each man knew precisely what he had to do, when to heave stone, when to hammer a pit prop into place. The silence was important too because it helped them to discover whether the man behind the stone fall was alive or not. If there was enough life left in him he would yell, and that was at least an incentive for the backbreaking, dangerous labour they had undertaken. There was no yell from Bill Seaton.

At last the mass of the stone was cleared away, and the miners still worked on steadily, Tom at their head. Behind them the overman had appeared, and he waited in silence. Another stone was moved: Matt Headley said softly, 'Can you reach him, Tom?'

Carefully Tom Seaton moved up the edge of the pile of stone, away from the point where his father's body must be lying. He passed back more stone and uncovered his father's blackened hand. 'Aye,' he said and reached out and felt for the pulse.

'He's alive . . . Thank God,' Tom Seaton said.

The overman said, 'I warned him. I warned you all. Over and over I warned you watch out for the pit props here. That roof's not safe.'

Still hauling stone from his father, Tom Seaton said, 'That's not the way you were talking when we came on shift, Mr. Warhurst' He passed a stone behind him to a miner who was chewing tobacco. Carefully the miner put down the lump of stone, then spat at the overman's feet...

Like everybody else in the town Jack Ford had heard the warning siren, but there was no way of finding out whether the man hurt was known to him or not, so he took the only way he could to get news, and went into the 'Bluebell'. It was almost deserted, and what few men were there had heard nothing but rumours. An ambulance had been seen going into the pit yard but of course there'd be an ambulance, thought Ford. There'd be an ambulance even if they were bringing up corpses. There'd have to be an inquest. For once Ford felt uneasy, in his new, neat suit, clean shirt, smart tie. There were so many people he knew who worked down St. Oswin's pit and the welfare of all of them was important to him. He stood alone at the bar drinking whisky, and suddenly Matt Headley appeared, still black from the pit. Well at least it wasn't Matt. Of all the men he knew Matt was probably the most important to him; they'd been together for so long, seen and done so much. For a moment in his relief he forgot their quarrel and then it came back to him.

'So you still don't trust me,' Jack Ford said.

'It isn't that,' Matt Headley said. 'I just—have you told your girl yet?'

'Don't push me, Matt,' Jack Ford said. 'I've told you I'll do it tonight and I will.'

'I should wait a bit, Jack,' Matt Headley said. 'There's been a pit accident.'

'I heard the siren,' Jack Ford said. 'That's what I'm here for—to find out. Who was it, man? Who?'

'It's her da,' Matt Headley said. 'He's broken his back—fall of stone. And the bosses are trying to say it was his fault.'

■

They'd got him into hospital as fast as they could, cleaned him up and put him into a private room. He lay bandaged up to his chin on the bed and now his wife and his daughter were with him. He had been sedated and was barely conscious. He said in a whisper, 'I don't care what that overman says. There was no warning, no warning at all.'

Jessie said, 'Hush now, father. The doctor said you must try and rest.'

'And then the whole lot came down,' said Bill. His head, the only part of his body that could move, turned and his eyes sought Bella's. 'I was right, wasn't I?' he asked.

'Right, bonny lad,' said Bella.

'You remember,' Bill Seaton said. 'The other night I said I wished I could miss the first day back ... It looks as if you'll have me under your feet after all, bonny lass.'

His eyes closed and he slept.

Jessie said, 'I'll have to get back to school, mam.'

'That's all right, hinny,' said Bella. 'You go. He's got me with him.'

Jessie kissed her mother and left her and at once when they were alone Bella took Bill's hand in hers. Unconsciously his fingers returned her grasp.

21

In the school corridor the handbell rang for the change of lessons. The boy who rang the bell was proud of his position as monitor and put all the muscle he had into ringing it. It clanged incessantly, a ghastly warning for fire perhaps? Or plague? Or universal disaster? It was for none of these things: the bell stated merely that now 300 pupils would stop studying Geography and begin the study of English Literature. Jessie walked along the corridor carrying a pile of exercise books. 3A's attempts at appreciating the *Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. They were not very good appreciations, but then Jessie had never expected they would be. Her views on the Charge of the Light Brigade were considerably at odds with those of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. To her mind the 600 had been murdered, if not massacred, and there was no glory in that. She moved briskly down the corridor but her mind was filled with thoughts of her father. Today, to her mind, was not a day to celebrate heroism, to remember glorious death in the face of Muscovite artillery; today was the day for the celebration of small things, intimate things, the remembrance of things past. As she passed the headmaster's office the door opened and Ashton appeared. Even in her dazed state she had no doubt that he had been waiting for her. He was, as always, courteous and diffident.

'Miss Seaton,' he said. She went forward to meet him. 'Is there any news?' he asked.

'His back's broken,' said Jessie. 'How badly they don't know.'

'I am—very sorry,' said Ashton.

Jessie said, 'Thank you.'

'Not very adequate words, are they?' said Ashton. 'But I just want to say this—if I can help in any way at all—now or at any time—I shall be proud and happy to do so.'

The offer was sincere, and she knew it to be so. Her problem was that he didn't understand how, given the situation, a working man would retreat into his own kind and refuse to emerge. How could she begin to tell him that an offer of help from someone like himself would be assessed as charity, and dismissed as such?

'You're very kind,' she said, 'but quite frankly, Mr. Ashton —' As she spoke there was a sound of laughter and scuffling from 3A's classroom down the hall.

'I'd better go to my class,' she said.

'No,' said Ashton. 'They can wait till I've finished.' The tone of his voice surprised her, it was a decision reached, and a decision he would abide by, regardless of the consequences.

'There would be no strings attached,' said Ashton, 'not to a loan, I mean. I give you my word. And there are times when we all need help. After what has happened to your father money has to be important, and I have a little put by, so—'

'You're very kind,' said Jessie, 'and I appreciate it, honestly I do, but we'll manage.' The uproar from 3A increased. 'We always have,' she said, and set off to quell the riot.

*

Bella had not expected a private room, it was the kind of largesse that she associated only with wealth, and yet the mine-owners, so she had been told, had insisted that there be a private room for her Bill. It was a small room, true, but it was comfortable, and the nurses who came in and out briskly, with that sense of impartial charity that only a nurse can purvey, were the best available, and Bella knew it ... For the moment Bill was calm. He had as yet no real idea of what had happened to him; in a flash of insight Bella thought that perhaps Bill would never have any real idea of what had occurred: but always at the back of his mind would be the

thought that the next day, the next wonderful day, he would wake up and his back wouldn't be broken; that he would stand and spar with Tom again, take next door's whippets for a walk, dig in his allotment, go back down the mine. But the doctor had been certain, with the kind of chilling certainty that admits of no arguments. Bill, until the day he died, and if he were lucky, would pass his days in a wheelchair, and his nights on the ground floor of their house; walking about, climbing stairs, were luxuries his body could no longer afford. She knew Bill's body as she knew her own; it was a hard and competent body, and a comforting one too, perhaps because of its very hardness, but it was about to go soft; inevitably it was about to go soft. Bella Seaton thought, I've just been widowed, and accepted it. This was the man she had married and this was the man she would stay with.

They sat in a companionable silence; at least they had that and would have it for ever more. No more fears about pit accidents, about the scream of the siren, about a hammering on the back door at three in the morning. The worst that could happen to Bill had happened, and it could never occur again ... He looked up at her, the sedation he had had wearing away at last, and it seemed that the drugs had given him the sort of perception that enabled him to look into her mind.

'Well, mother,' he said, 'you can quit worrying about whether they're going to bring me up feet first or not. I won't be going down by again in a hurry.'

You'll never be going down by, she thought; you'll never even go upstairs to bed again. But these were thoughts that she kept to herself ... so long as he was tranquil, so long as he rested enough so that he could leave the hospital, so long as she could get him home, then she had something to live for.

They hadn't sat on much longer before they had a visitor; a neat visitor, almost an elegant one. New suit, starched collar, tie carefully tied—looks like Jack Ford when he isn't really

trying, thought Bella, and then dismissed the idea: Jack Ford always tried. This one, whether he liked it or lumped it, was a flunkey, blue suit or no blue suit. He shut the door with exaggerated care, and crossed over to the bed and looked down at Bill.

'Mr. Seaton?' he said.

Bill Seaton looked up at him. 'Aye?' he said.

The newcomer said, 'I've been sent by the mine-owners. They've asked me to extend their deepest sympathy.'

'Thanks,' Bill Seaton said. Sick as he was, there was a wealth of irony in the word.

The mine-owners' representative said hastily, 'And to make sure you suffer as little hardship as possible.'

Bill Seaton said, 'Oh aye?' If anything the irony was more pronounced.

'Naturally money will be of the first importance at a time like this,' the representative said.

'It will that,' said Bella. Her tone was hard; it was as if a door had been slammed in his face. But he continued to smile his tallyman's smile.

'The company has authorised me to hand over to you the sum of £100,' he said, and opened his briefcase, took from it an envelope. 'I have it here. In this envelope,' he said, and held the envelope out to Bella. Even the envelope looked important; it was all crackling manila and bulged with promise.

'Perhaps you'd be good enough to count it, Mrs. Seaton,' the representative said.

Bella took the money from him, and opened the envelope, heard the rich crackle of its paper as her thumb slid underneath the seal and pulled it open. Even that seemed a kind of profanation; this wasn't just wealth, it was elegance. Her fingers scooped inside the envelope and came out with a bundle of notes, fivers and ones. To count them she spread them out on Bill's bed; they lay there like the counters of some children's game, but this was real, this was money: the fivers gleamed white, their print an assurance of wealth in itself, and the

pound notes crackled beneath her fingers because they were crisp and new. Slowly, laboriously, she counted them: a hundred pounds, just as he had promised.

'By,' said Bella. 'Will you look at that.'

Bill couldn't, and she scooped the money together, held it out so that he could see it.

'How much did you say?' Bill said.

'A hundred,' said Bella. 'A whole hundred.'

'It looks like an awful lot of money,' Bill Seaton said.

Softly the representative asked, 'Can you write, Mr. Seaton?'

'I went to school like everybody else,' Bill Seaton said.

At once the representative turned on the power of his tallyman's smile. 'No, no,' he said, 'you misunderstand. I mean are you able to write in your present condition? Just your signature.'

'I think so,' said Bill. 'What do you want me to sign?'

'A receipt for this money,' the representative said. 'It's rather a lot, you know.'

Bill Seaton said, 'It is that.'

'And it has to be signed for,' said the representative.

'I haven't got a pen,' said Bill, and the representative pulled a bed table into place where Bill could reach out to sign, took a document from his briefcase, put it on the table, and uncapped his fountain pen.

'Not to worry, Mr. Seaton,' he said. 'All taken care of. Your usual signature, if you please, just here.' He indicated a place on the form and put his pen into Bill Seaton's hand. Behind them the door had opened, but the prospect of money had drawn the eyes of all three of them so that they were unaware that somebody else had come into the room. It was Jack Ford, and under one arm he carried a bag of fruit. He watched as the representative indicated the place on the form where Bill was to sign, then lifted Bill's listless hand and guided it to the place; then he came forward.

'You bloody ghoul,' said Ford.

The representative turned. 'I beg your pardon?' he asked.

'You heard me,' said Ford. 'I said ghoul. But vulture would be more like it.'

He strode over to the table, very gently took the pen from Bill's hand, then picked up the form that Bill had been about to sign.

'You're not content with breaking his back,' he said, 'now you want to eat up the rest of him as well.'

Quickly he read through the document.

'And you have the nerve to call this a receipt,' he said. '"No further claims against the company—adequate and sufficient compensation—freely admit it was caused by my own error of judgement and the company is in no way responsible—"'

He turned to Bill Seaton. 'You very nearly signed your life away,' he said, then looked at Bella. 'Give the man his money back,' he said.

Bella Seaton said, 'But, Jack—it's a hundred pounds.'

Bill Seaton said, his voice a whisper, 'Give it back, Bella.'

At once she held it out to the mine-owners' representative.

'Mr. Seaton, you're being very foolish,' the representative said.

'Thank you for calling,' Bill Seaton said. 'Good day.'

The representative hesitated; usually when he brought money to people they were happy to have it; never before had they given it back.

The man who had burst in on them said, 'You heard him, mister.' The representative knew instinctively that there was no arguing with this one. He took the hundred pounds and the document, put them in his briefcase and left. It was degrading, it was downright ignoble that he should have to come back for his fountain pen...

When he had gone for the second time, Bella Seaton said, 'It's the first time I've known you turn money down, Jack Ford.'

Ford said, 'A stinking hundred pounds for that.' He pointed at Bill, lying on the bed.

'But they're paying all the hospital bills an'all,' said Bella. 'It was them got him a private room.'

'So they bloody well should,' said Ford, and then quickly, 'Sorry, Mrs. Seaton, but it was them who put him in it.' He turned to Bill. 'Listen, Mr. Seaton—don't you sign anything till you've talked to your Union Secretary.'

Bill Seaton said in the same thread of a voice, 'Yes, Jack.'

'And talk to him quick,' Jack Ford said, 'and mind you tell him whose fault it was.'

Bill Seaton whispered, 'They're trying to say they warned me the roof wasn't safe.'

'I know,' said Ford, 'Matt Headley told me.'

'Well they didn't warn me,' Bill Seaton said. 'Nobody warned me.'

'Matt told me that an'all,' said Ford. 'Don't worry. There'll be plenty of witnesses.'

Bella Seaton said, 'You mean you think we'll get more—more money I mean?'

'A hell of a lot more,' said Ford. 'That hundred was just a try-on.'

'Oh Jack,' said Bella, 'thank heaven you came when you did.'

And will you say that after you've heard what I've got to tell Jessie? he wondered.

Aloud he said, 'It was lucky all right ... but where was your Union Secretary?'

*

Jessie had come home and made tea. Her forebodings about the Light Brigade had all come true; even the post-mortem on it had been a disaster. But the children in her class had known what had happened to her; they knew all about Bill's accident. Their forbearance had been adult in its courtesy. She sat and sipped tea and thought of the things she would liked to have told them, the things they would inevitably come to know, to take for granted if the world didn't change ... How short the good times were, how long the intervals of

disaster. From outside there was the sound of a footstep. Jack, she thought, but the familiar voice did not call out, and it was Billy who came in, carrying his cheap suitcase that contained all he owned in the world. But for once she didn't notice the suitcase.

'Billy!' she called, then ran to him and embraced him. 'Oh it's good to see you.'

Billy let the suitcase fall and returned his sister's embrace.

'I came as soon as I got the telegram,' he said. 'How's dad?'

'His back's broken,' Jessie said.

'Dear God,' said Billy. 'Roof fall?'

'Yes,' said Jessie. 'Our Tom was with him. He and the rest of the men worked like demons. If they hadn't—he would have died. But even as it is—he'll never work again, Billy.'

'He'll be lucky if he ever gets off a chair,' said Billy. 'I'd better be off to the hospital.'

'Have you eaten?' she asked.

'Not since breakfast,' said Billy.

'You can't got out without something inside you,' said Jessie. 'You must be starving coming all that way.'

She poured out another cup of tea and then began to slice bread.

'Mam with him?' Billy asked.

'Yes,' she said, and fetched the butter and jam from the dresser. Suddenly a thought struck her, and she turned to face her brother.

'How ever did you manage for the fare?' she asked.

'I sold a few books,' said Billy.

She slammed butter and jam down on the deal table.

'You did what?' she asked.

'Well,' said Billy, 'they won't be any use to me now, will they?'

'What do you mean?' said Jessie. 'Won't be any use?'

'Be sensible, Jessie,' her brother said. 'How can I go on being a medical student with dad in the state he is?'

Jessie Seaton said, 'You're just using dad as an excuse. You

want to leave so you can go into politics.'

Billy Seaton sat down, drank tea, spread butter on the slice of bread. It was bad enough arguing with Jessie at any time, but when you were starving you hadn't a hope. He said thickly through a mouthful of bread and jam, 'That's not true, Jessie. You know it's not true. Not this time. We're going to need every penny I can earn.'

'But you've only got two years to go,' his sister said.

'I've got no time at all,' said Billy, and swallowed more bread. 'It's clerking for me now if I can find a place.'

Passionately his sister said, 'No!' In the one monosyllable there was a whole world held at bay.

Billy said patiently, 'You can't keep all of us, Jess, and our Tom's got Mary to look out for . . . I'm not sure I would qualify anyway.'

'Oh aren't you?' said Jessie with bitter sarcasm. 'And you never less than fifth in your year. Now you listen to me, Billy Seaton. You're going to go and see dad and spend the night here—and then you're going back to University and buy back the books that you sold.'

'It's a nice dream,' said Billy, 'but how can I? We're skint, Jess.'

'Oh no we're not,' Jess said. 'Jack'll lend you the money.'

'You're joking,' said Billy. 'He hasn't a bean.'

Jessie said, 'He's been offered £450 a year.'

Billy Seaton couldn't believe it. 'What?' he said.

Jessie said wearily, 'I was going to tell you later on, but you might as well know now—he's joined the bosses, Billy.'

Billy looked incredulous. 'Jack has?'

My brother is very intelligent, she thought, but oh my God he's naïve.

'He'll make a good boss, Billy,' she said. 'He's got the brains for it—and the ruthlessness.'

'But he's always been one of us,' Billy said.

'Not by choice,' she said. 'Being one of us was a mistake Jack's parents made for him—and now he's putting it right.'

'And you're still going to marry him?' said Billy.

'Yes,' she said, 'I am,' and poured more tea into his cup. 'I love him, God help me.'

*

In the pub they were holding their own investigation into what had happened. Now that it was all over they were cleaned up, with that fresh, scrubbed look of miners who had come straight from the bath. Matt was with them, as was Crawford, a Union official. He was a stocky man, stolid in temperament, a man who'd held power for years without ever knowing how power should be used, and therefore bored with it: a man waiting out his time for his pension. And yet he was the only expert they'd got; without him to turn to for aid and comfort, where would the miners go? Jack Ford and Tom Seaton came into the 'Bluebell' together and Tom gestured to where Crawford sat, buying a round of drinks for the men who needed him.

'That's him,' said Tom.

Together they moved up and joined the crowd.

'Evening,' said Ford, and turned to the stolid man in the cheap suit. 'Mr. Crawford, is it?'

'Aye,' said Crawford. 'That's right.' His voice was nervous: he had never been, never pretended to be, a clever man, but he'd been in Union politics long enough to know when an attack was imminent.

'Bill Seaton's area secretary?' Ford asked.

'That's right,' said Crawford and then turned to Tom Seaton. For Tom at least there was a well-tried formula which had always worked in the past. 'Tom lad,' he said. 'I didn't see you there. I was just saying to the lads here—what a terrible thing to happen.' He waited: it was now Tom's turn to show himself aware of sympathy offered from on high, but Tom wasn't playing according to the rules. Tom also waited.

Jack Ford said, 'It could have been worse, Mr. Crawford.'

'Worse than a broken back?' Crawford said, and the indig-

nation in his voice was genuine. Before his days of officialdom he had been a miner for many years; he knew the cruelty of the mines.

'It could have been a broken back and a hundred quid compensation and not a penny more,' said Ford.

Crawford put down his glass untouched.

'A hundred pound?' he asked. 'Are you sure?'

'I was there when it was offered,' said Ford. 'In the private room the company paid for, and the feller from the company was there too, Mr. Crawford handing out money and asking poor old Bill to sign what he called a receipt. I read it, Mr. Crawford. If Bill had signed that he would have admitted it was all his fault, and the company was paying him that hundred out of the kindness of their hearts. There in that room I read it, Mr. Crawford—and where the hell were you?'

Crawford knew himself to be driven into a corner; all that was left for him was to fight back.

'See here,' he said. 'Are you one of my members?'

'No,' said Ford, turning away to pick up his beer, and added, 'Thank God.'

'Then what the hell's it got to do with you?' Crawford asked.

Tom Seaton said, 'He's a friend, Mr. Crawford. A chap that's helping me da for nothing while the feller that's paid to help him sits in a pub and drinks beer.'

'I was just on me way over,' Crawford said.

'There's nobody stopping you,' said Tom.

Crawford accepted defeat. He finished what was left of his beer and went out.

Tom lifted his glass in salute to Ford. 'Thanks, Jack,' he said.

'Never mind thanks,' said Ford. 'You've still got a lot to do. Witnesses' names. Get on with it.'

'Can't you stay and help me?' Tom Seaton asked.

But he had a lot more to do that night than collect witnesses' names.

'It's not my union, Tom,' he said. 'I've stuck my nose in

far enough. But we can always talk—if you think you're going to need me after this.'

'Need you?' said Tom. 'Well of course I—' as he spoke a miner came up from the bar and handed them both a pint.

'Ta, Andy,' said Tom.

Jack Ford, surprised, said, 'Thanks very much.'

'It's us that should be thanking you,' the miner called Andy said.

Tom Seaton remembered that business was business.

'Here, Andy you were there when it happened, weren't you?' he asked, and took the miner aside.

Jack Ford sipped at his pint. He would allow himself this one, then it was time to get on. But as he drank, Matt Headley came up to him.

'Jack,' Matt Headley said, and Jack Ford turned to face him. More reproaches?

'I'm sorry I spoke like I did the other day,' said Matt.

'That's all right.'

Gently, Matt Headley said, 'You're in a right mess, aren't you?'

'It couldn't be much worse,' Jack Ford said.

Matt said, 'Dolly says she's still willing to take a chance if you think—'

'Forget it,' said Ford. 'That'll just be a worse mess. We'll get married like I said.' He finished his drink and turned to go.

Matt Headley said, 'She's here now—at me mother's. If you want to see her—'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I do. Thanks.' He clapped Matt Headley on the shoulder hard enough to make the fat man wince, then started off for the door.

Matt Headley called after him: 'Bill Seaton's lucky you came in when you did.'

Matt Headley didn't even know the meaning of the word ironic.

•

To go to Matt's house was neither easy nor difficult; it was something that had to be done and so you just went, got on with it, jolting on the tram, walking along the flagway with what was left of your sergeant's strut and when you got to the door you didn't hesitate because hesitation would have meant fear of the consequences, and there was no point in fearing the consequences. The consequences were there; they had to be faced. Get them over with, that was the answer. It wasn't a very good answer, but it was the only answer there was. He grasped the knocker of the Headleys' front door and rapped firmly twice. It was Dolly who opened the door.

'Oh,' she said. There was enough fear in her voice for the two of them.

'Aren't you going to ask me in?' Ford asked.

'Matt's at the pub,' she said.

Almost, he could have sworn, she wanted him to go and join him there, and yet behind the visible fear, he could sense something else—a longing that he should stay.

'Aye,' said Ford. 'I know he's at the pub. I've just left him there—he told me you were here, and it's you I've come to see.'

'You'd better come in, then,' she said, and stood aside to let him precede her. There was still fear in her movements, but he could still sense the longing too. He went down the tiny passage and into the front room, and she followed.

'We won't be interrupted here,' he said.

'Mam and dad's out,' she said. 'Gone to the pictures. Say what you have to say, Jack.'

Ford sat down on the sofa.

'On your holidays, are you?' he asked.

She sat down in front of him and faced him like a prisoner on a charge.

'The boss and his wife's taken Sir Horatio off to the country for some fishing,' she said, 'so cook said I could come home and see me mam and dad for a couple of days.' She hesitated then asked, 'Did our Matt tell you we had a talk?'

'Aye,' said Ford. 'He told me.'

'I meant what I said, Jack,' she said. 'I don't have to have the bairn.'

'You'll have it,' said Ford.

'But you've got money now,' she said. 'We could go to a proper feller.'

'No!' said Ford.

'One thing I want you to remember,' said Dolly 'I offered, Jack. I offered it to you twice.'

'You listen to me,' Ford said. 'I wouldn't let anybody risk themselves like that for me. Not anybody.'

And then she surprised him.

'You're a proud man, Jack,' she said

'Proud?' he said.

'You're not thinking of me at all,' said Dolly. 'All your mind's got room for is yourself—and her mebbee. Jessie Seaton.'

'Not thinking of you?' he asked. 'I'm going to marry you.'

'Aye,' she said, 'but do you want to, Jack?'

'We'll be happy enough,' he said.

'Will we?' she asked.

'I promise you—' said Ford.

'Promise?' said Dolly. 'Well you're a man of your word, I'll say that for you. If you weren't we wouldn't be getting married.'

The word married had been spoken now, and she was no longer a prisoner on a charge. The fear had abated and there was only the longing as she looked about the room.

'Here's where it all started,' she said. 'Remember? You missed your last tram and I brought you some blankets . . .' she smiled; perhaps for a second there was a feeling of victory in the smile, but she was beginning to know him well, and the feeling, if it had been there, was suppressed almost at once.

'I won't lie to you, Jack,' she said. 'I'm not sorry it's happened. I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you.'

He'd been out of work and stealing sheep, and she didn't even know he could steal sheep for a living, but once she'd

set eyes on him, that was it, he thought. The moment I laid eyes on you . . . and the bank clerk with the prospect of becoming a manager had no chance at all. And what would her chances have been, married to him as he then was? No work and no prospect of work. But she'd seen him and that was it. He wondered if she had also seen, in a visionary sort of way, that his gamble with Sir Horatio would pay off? So many of the women he'd known had come up with the right answers, and so many of them had asked all the wrong questions, or sometimes, like Dolly, had asked no questions at all.

'Are we really going to live in London?' she asked.

And there it was—part of the joy of women for a man who liked women. She knew and she accepted and she rejoiced.

'What's this about London?' he asked.

'Your new job,' she said. 'Matt said you'd have to go to London when you worked for Sir Horatio.'

He looked at her, his mind racing. This visit was only a part of what he had to do, and the more pleasant part at that. When he faced Jessie it would be to tell her that she must be deprived of that which quite rightly she felt to be her due. He would have to offer her something else in exchange, and there was only one thing he had to offer.

'The London business isn't all settled yet, Dolly,' he said. 'Not by a long way.'

'Well I thought Sir Horatio wanted you,' she asked.

And how do you know that, he wondered. By listening at keyholes—how else. And what was wrong with listening at keyholes? Listening gave you knowledge, and knowledge was power, and power was what everybody wanted—everybody with any sense.

'Supposing I didn't take it, Dolly,' he said. 'Would you mind that?'

'How would we manage?' she asked.

'The yards are starting up again,' he said, 'I'll get a job eventually.'

'It wouldn't be a posh job though, would it?' she said.

'No,' said Ford. 'It wouldn't. But it might be the only one there was going for you and me.'

She was a realist, there was no question of that. She knew at once that things were going on in Ford's mind that she would never understand, but then there would always be things going on in Ford's mind that she would never understand. And sooner or later those things would mean that Jack Ford would get on, she knew it. He couldn't help it, that was the way he was.

'So long as I've got you, Jack,' she said. 'I'd be scared in London anyway. But I don't think you'll be happy in a shipyard; not any more ... Not unless you're running it.'

She sat down opposite him on the sofa and kissed him It was a gentle kiss at first, almost a compassionate one, he thought, and yet why should she feel compassion for him? His arms came round her, and suddenly she was clinging to him, compassion forgotten. At last she broke free.

'We'd better go upstairs,' she said and went to the door.

'Wait,' said Ford.

He went to her, and took a small box from his pocket, a jeweller's box, velvet covered, plush lined. When he opened it there was a ring inside, a rather lovely ring of sapphires and diamonds.

She looked at it, awed.

'Oh! ... Jack,' she said.

'Let's try it on and see if it fits,' said Ford. He put the ring on the third finger of her left hand, and it fitted easily, too easily.

'Now we're engaged,' he said.

Dolly held it out so that the stones could catch the light.

'Oh it's lovely,' she said.

'A bit slack by the look of it,' said Ford.

She twisted it round her finger, unwilling to let it go even for a moment.

'Just a bit,' she said reluctantly.

'We'll have it fixed tomorrow,' said Ford.

Dolly looked again at the ring and suddenly her expression changed.

'You never got this for me, did you?' she said. 'This is *her* ring.'

She tried to take it off, and as she did so Ford's right hand shot out, covering both of hers, squeezing her fingers together.

'Let it be,' he said.

'No!' she said and struggled still to take off the ring. His hand squeezed harder, harder, so that the stones bit into her finger.

'You're hurting,' she said.

'Let it be,' said Ford, and she submitted at last. At once he freed her hand and waited whilst she twisted the ring back into position on her finger.

'That's your ring, Dolly,' he said. 'You're the one I'm going to marry. Now come on upstairs.'

22

Bill lay in the bed: he had still given no indication that he realised exactly what had happened to him, and perhaps as Billy had told his mother, he didn't yet know. Billy had tried to warn her about something called delayed shock: the kind of shock that could go on for days, perhaps even weeks, before the patient was fully able to realise that he was maimed or crippled. Bella had listened to her son, but so far all she was able to comprehend was that Bill was tranquil. It was true that he had backed up Jack when Jack had made her give the money back to the man from the employers, but that was men's business, and besides, it reminded her of Bill as he had always been, alert, aggressive, quick to realise an encroachment on his rights. They sat beside the bed in the private room. They had turned down an offer of money from the employers, but at least they hadn't been evicted. Bella pondered the strangeness of her world as it now was: more money from the bosses, and a private room even when that money had been refused. Bill looked at the bedside table beside him. On it was a bowl that contained oranges, apples and grapes.

'Fancy a bit of fruit?' he asked.

Billy said at once, 'No thanks, dad. That's for you. Build you up a bit.'

'Jack brought it,' said his father. 'A real caring lad, Jack. Them bloody owners was trying to rob me. Jack wouldn't let them.'

This was not the Jack that Jessie had described to Bill.

'He stood up for you against the bosses?' Bill asked.

'He did that,' said Bella. 'If you could call it standing up.

He made us turn down a hundred pounds.'

'Jack knew what he was doing,' Bill Seaton said. 'I'm glad he's on my side.'

Billy said, 'From what Jessie was saying he's gone over to the bosses' side.'

'He says I'm going to cost them more than a hundred pounds —the bosses, I mean,' said Bill. 'And he's going to see that I get it.'

'Do you really think he will?' Billy asked.

'I know he will,' said his father.

Billy looked at his mother: so far her mind had seemed full only with the fact that a hundred pounds had been refused.

'Do you think he's on our side, mam?' Billy asked.

She was pensive for a moment, in a way that he remembered; the way she'd been when there had been important decisions to make, and only she and his father to make them.

'I don't care whose side he's on, Billy,' she said. 'We couldn't manage without him. None of us, do you hear?'

'Yes, mam,' said Billy. 'I hear. As a matter of fact, Jessie said that an'all...'

•

He had always avoided the sea coast whenever possible. To walk along the beach was a temptation to daydream, to imagine oneself on a big ship escaping from Gallowshield, and that was impossible. He had come back to the town a man on his own, with no commitments; but now he had commitments —my God he had, to a woman he was about to marry, and a woman he had irretrievably lost. There was no escape, and so he could take a walk along the beach, and watch the big ships setting out, and know he could never hope to be aboard them. His place was here in the town.

For once in his life while he was walking he had no decision to make. The decisions had already been made, by himself and by Dolly, and his only problem now was to make known

those decisions, and that problem was a major one. How could he tell her? What would she say, once she knew? And what did it matter anyway what she said? The thing was done, there was a bairn on the way, and that was a reality that she must accept. What kept him from action was the thought of her reaction to the news he had to bring to her. Not that he knew how she would react; the fascinating thing about Jessie was that you never knew how she would react, to good news or bad, but he knew that he was about to hurt her, to wound her perhaps beyond curing. He slogged on across the sands, putting words together in his mind, inane words, useless words. There was no excuse for what he had done, no justification for what had happened, and that's all there was to it. To seek for words to excuse, to mitigate, was the sort of cowardice he despised in others and even more in himself. And yet ... and yet ... So long as she didn't know she was that much more protected, more able to concentrate on what had happened to her father, to try to pull the remnants of that shattered life together. It wasn't fair, he thought. It wasn't bloody fair: at this of all times, Bill Seaton should have been fit and well, and able to help his daughter, not lying on his back needing her strength. Maybe he would put it off for a while ... and then he thought of Dolly.

Dolly in many ways was a millstone, no question of it. If he ever had dealings again with a man like Manners Dolly would be no help at all, but she'd make a bloody good hindrance. Touchy, aware of her own deficiencies, constantly on her guard. These were not the qualities you took into Sir Horatio Manners's world, not if you needed to get on, as he so desperately needed to get on. And yet ... and yet ... she had offered to risk an abortion, which was the same as offering to let him go. That he had refused it was his own stupid fault, and maybe she was right at that, maybe it was pride and only pride that had made him refuse her offer. She wanted him, and made no secret of her need, she was honest. In her own way she was honest as Jessie was honest, and he owed to both

women comparable honesty. It was a bitter price to pay.

Suddenly he became aware of the sunlight beating on his back. It was a beautiful day, sky blue, a sea silky grey turning gradually to bottle green as you looked out at it. It was a slow-moving, sensuous sea, gently heaving, the waves curling in as if by slow motion, catching the sunlight, reflecting it in diamond drops. He had walked further than he realised, and found himself alone for a moment, the only other living creatures the inevitable squabbling gulls, but even their screeches were muted that day; they wheeled and planed, and almost achieved content. Perhaps never in his life would he see a scene more tranquil than this, perhaps this was a time to end it. He was a strong swimmer, but the sea was wide...

He turned and walked across the soft sands that gleamed like white gold until he arrived at the hard sand left by the retreating tide, feeling his feet crunched into it as if he trod on icing sugar. A beautiful world, a dream world, a world that was his for ever if he kept on walking and swam for as long as he could. Suddenly from behind a pile of rocks a group of boys ran out, makeshift bathing costumes pinned about them, and hurled themselves into the water. They swam like fish, every one. One of them, his bathing costume too big for him, swam right out of it, and dived to retrieve it while the others laughed. There was nothing but innocence in their laughter. Then they became aware of him watching and the innocence turned to shame. He turned parallel to the sea and walked away from them. These children, it was quite possible, were the ones that Jessie taught He owed them neither shame nor disgrace.

He walked on further and came to a place where rocks formed a tiny, natural harbour, their long arms reaching out to embrace the still receptive sea. All about him were pebbles worn smooth by myriad tides. He stooped and gathered a handful and began to skim them across the water, playing ducks and drakes. When the pebble bounces three times he thought, and flicked them one by one. The last one was a

beauty, flat and smooth and gleaming white He flicked it and it bounced, bounced, and bounced again, then disappeared into the heaving water. It was time to talk to Jessie.

*

In the Seaton kitchen Jessie watched as Billy brought in his shabby suitcase already packed, then sat down at the scrubbed deal table where so much of their life had been spent.

'You ought to be off,' Jessie said.

'There's plenty of time,' said Billy.

Jessie said fiercely, 'You've got to stop at the hospital to see mam and dad.'

Bill smiled at her. 'You trying to get rid of me or something?' he asked.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said.

'Want to be alone with your young man, is that it?'

He saw the colour rise up in her face and said, no longer making fun: 'Don't rush me. The train doesn't leave till six.'

From outside they heard once again the sound of a familiar footstep and Jack's voice called out the familiar words: 'Anybody home?'

Bill looked at his sister. The blush was still there.

'It's Jack,' he said.

Jessie raised her voice and called out, 'Come on in, Jack.'

He came in, his face impassive, then checked when he saw Billy and the suitcase.

To Jessie he said, 'Hullo, love,' and then to Billy, 'It looks like hullo and goodbye, Billy.'

'I've got half an hour,' Billy said. 'Nice to see you, Jack.' He offered his hand and Jack took it. Of the three of them only Jessie noticed that he hesitated before he took her brother's hand.

'Welcome to the middle class,' said Billy.

'Billy!' his sister said.

'Don't believe everything you hear, kidder,' said Jack, and

Jessie looked at him, alarmed. The last time they had talked he had been so certain, so utterly certain. Now he seemed almost ashamed.

'Do you mean you're not taking that job?' Jessie asked. He knew at that moment that he wasn't, that he hadn't the remotest idea what the hell he was going to do instead.

'I'd like a few words in private if you don't mind,' he said.

Billy grinned. 'I know. Three's a crowd. Give us a shout when it's safe for immature adolescence.'

He left them whistling, 'Just like the ivy, I'll cling to you.'

Jack Ford began, 'Jessie, I—'

But she also had urgent matters to communicate.

'Dad told me what you did for him,' she said. 'Jack, I'm very grateful, I—'

'Don't be,' said Ford.

She had reason to go to him, but now the two words stopped her, and she stood immobile, too far away to touch. He could have reached out his hand, he knew, and drawn her to him, but those things were over for ever.

'Jack,' she said. 'What on earth is this all about?'

'I'm not entitled to your gratitude—or anything else from you,' said Ford. 'Except a smack across the face maybe.'

She looked up into his face, then away, and went to sit at the table, her hands clasped on top of it.

'You'd better explain yourself,' she said.

'Aye,' said Ford, then hesitated. It was strange to see Jack Ford at a loss for words; terrifyingly strange.

At last he said, 'You were always one for plain speaking, Jessie.'

'I still am,' she said.

'I'll make it as plain as I can,' said Ford. 'I've got a girl into trouble. I'm going to have to marry her.'

The interlaced fingers on the deal table tightened, but all she said was, 'Anybody I know?'

'Matt Headley's sister,' said Ford. 'I stayed the night at his house once. She was there too.'

She sprang to her feet then; she couldn't bear it.

'You lying cheat,' she said.

Then she looked into his face, and the rage she had wanted to feel, needed to feel, abated. The man was in agony.

'That's right,' he said. 'I did cheat you, and I lied to you too—or at least I didn't tell you the truth. But that's because I love you, Jessie. I've never known anybody like you and I don't suppose I ever will again. But I'm the way I am. You could wait ... I couldn't. I'm sorry.'

'For me, Jack? Or for her?' Jessie asked. The rage had gone, but the pain remained: it was necessary to share the pain.

'Seems to me we've neither of us got much to look forward to,' she said.

He gave no answer: there was none to give.

'Well?' she said. 'Is that all you've got to tell me?'

'Aye,' said Ford.

'You'd better go then,' she said.

'You're entitled to your say,' Ford said.

She sighed and knew that the tears were not far.

'I've said all I want to,' she said.

He turned to leave. 'So long then.'

'Wait!' she said, and he turned back to face her.

'Are you taking her to London?' Jessie asked.

'No,' said Ford.

'You mean you'll leave her here?'

'I meant the job's off,' said Ford.

'But, Jack—'

'I'd never do any good away from here,' said Ford. But he was wrong there, and she knew he was wrong, and ached to tell him so: and yet stayed quiet.

'And anyway,' Ford continued, 'maybe you and Billy were right. I mean, look what happened to your father. There's work here crying out to be done, Jessie—and I can do it better than most ... So long.'

He left then and the door closed behind him. She stared at the heavy planks of wood; they would never open again

to let him in. It was impossible to believe that she would never again see Jack Ford except as a face in a crowd; and yet it was true. He had left her, and he could never come back—she could never allow him to come back. Even if she forgave him – but forgiveness was impossible after what he had done. No, not impossible, with that man nothing was impossible. It was just that he would never accept forgiveness. Suddenly she gave way to a frenzy of weeping, a great howl of grief that brought Billy hurrying in from the front room where he had been waiting. He took one look at his sister, and then grabbed her, held her in his arms, as the tears flowed.

'Jessie,' he said. 'What on earth –?'

Somehow she fought for, then achieved control.

'Jack's left me,' she said.

'What!' said Billy. 'I don't believe it.'

'He's got some girl pregnant,' she said, 'and they've got to get married.' He believed that all right.

'Well of all the dirty, rotten—' he began.

Still shuddering with sobs, Jessie said, 'The trouble is he's not, Billy. And we both know it.'

'I don't,' said Billy. 'To do a thing like that, then go sneaking off to London.'

'That's just it,' said Jessie. 'He's not going to London. He's going to stop here and work for the union—just like we always planned.' She looked at Billy; somehow managed to smile.

'The Lord giveth,' she said, 'and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord – oh Billy.'

Her arms tightened round him and this time the tears flowed freely. He stood there and held her; there was nothing else he could do, except to wonder whether Jack Ford could ever do anything so simple as join the union to help other people just because he'd got a girl pregnant. Life with Ford was never simple, but complicated, and the complications usually worked out to Jack Ford's advantage. But how could he tell his sister so? He rocked her gently in his arms the way their mother had once rocked him when he'd cut a knee or

broken a toy, and the world so it seemed had ended.

'Never mind, sis,' he said. 'Never mind. He's not the only pebble on the beach.'

Still sobbing, she broke away from him and fumbled for her handkerchief. He gave her his, and she wiped her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It won't happen again.'

'Would you like a cup of tea or anything?' Billy asked. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

Jessie's old manner came back to her, even though the tears still flowed.

'Oh no you don't,' she said. 'It's time you were off.'

'Look, sis,' said Billy, 'if Jack's not taking that job and you're not going to be married, how can I go on at the University?'

'Not the only pebble you said, and you were right, Billy boy,' his sister said. 'You were right.'

'What are you on about?' said Billy.

'Never you mind,' she said. 'Get yourself down to see dad, then get yourself on that train.'

She bustled him to the door and pushed his suitcase at him.

'Jessie,' he said protesting. 'I haven't even got the train fare.'

She fetched her bag, took money from it.

'Here,' she said and gave it to him. 'Don't worry about the rest.' She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him fiercely.

'Just promise me you'll study hard and be a good doctor.'

'Of course I will,' said Billy, 'but—'

'But nothing,' Jessie said. 'Just get on that train.'

She kissed him then and pushed him out of the kitchen, then shouted after him, 'And don't say anything to mam and dad about Jack. I'll tell them meself.'

For the second time the door banged, and another person she loved left her. She turned away back into the kitchen. A flash of gaudy colours caught her eye, and she went over to the dresser where the Union Jack lay, picked it up and saluted

it. Her memory reminded her of the voices of small boys singing:

'Land of hope and glory,
Mother of the free,
How shall we extol thee
Who are born of thee....'

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The good times never happen, and in the 20s they seemed farther away than ever; life was a treadmill of smoke, grit and dreary labour. But Jack Ford *knew* that his boat would come in. He had survived the Great War only to find the fight for survival as fierce in the northern shipyards as it was in the trenches. Jack didn't talk about survival – he acted, even when it meant hurting people. Like the girl who loved him... or his best friend, whose sister Jack took to bed.

Jack Ford's boat was coming in, but it would be carrying casualties.

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